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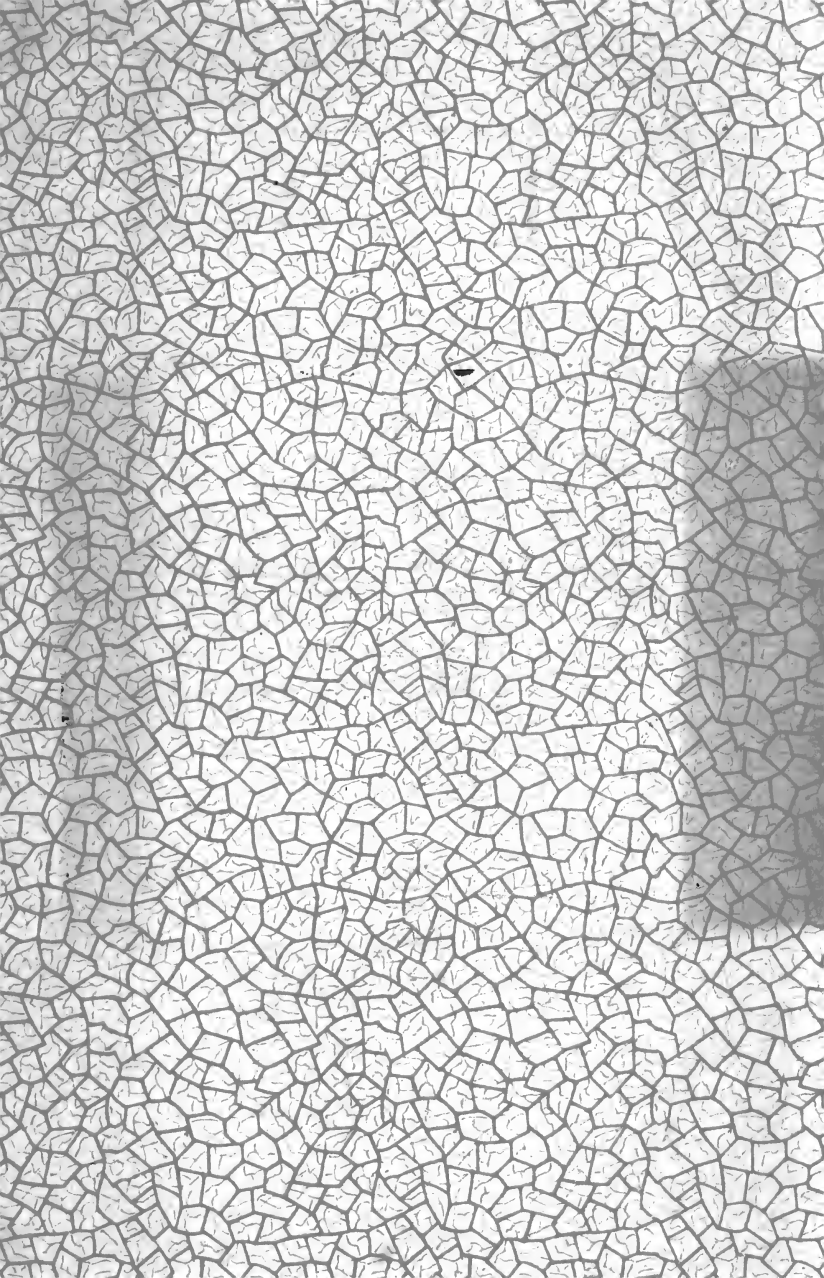
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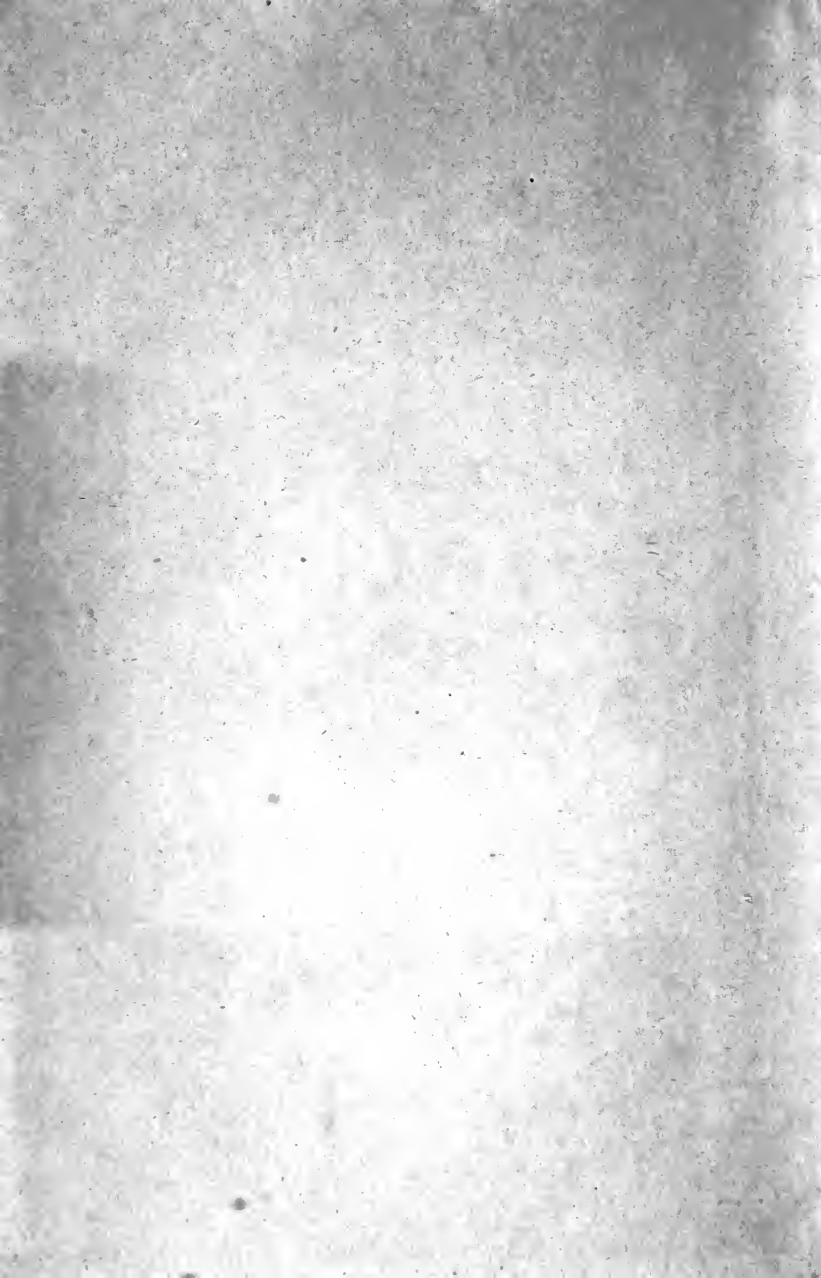
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A GREAT TEMPTATION.

VOL. II.

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A GREAT TEMPTATION.

BY

DORA RUSSELL,

AUTHOR OF

'FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW,' 'THE BROKEN SEAL,' 'THE TRACK
OF THE STORM,' 'A FATAL PAST,' 'THE VICAR'S
GOVERNESS,' 'THE LAST SIGNAL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.


VOL. II.

LONDON:

F. V. WHITE & CO.,

14 BEDFORD STREET, STRAND, W.C

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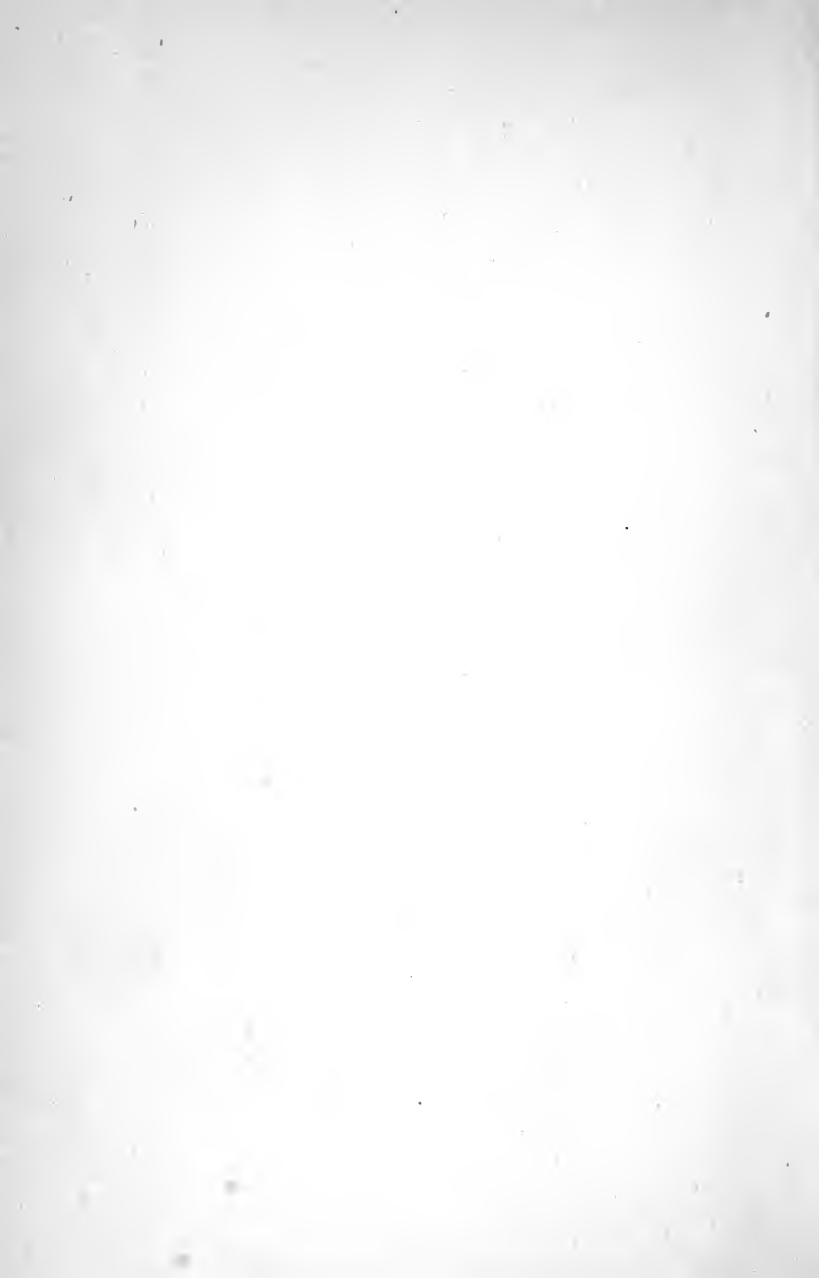
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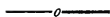
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A GREAT TEMPTATION.



A GREAT TEMPTATION.



CHAPTER I.

NEWS OF MARRIAGE.

LAURA INGRAM did 'think it over,' most seriously, after George Gifford left. She thought of her position and his ; a life of toil and struggle on one hand, of ease and comfort on the other. And she liked him ; liked this kindly, honest gentleman, with his somewhat countrified and old-fashioned

ideas ; but—ah, how often in the lives of fair women that momentous ‘but’ occurs ! ‘He can give me much, but I do not love him,’ said her heart. ‘He can give me daily bread, and I may starve,’ on the other hand spake reason and common sense. And after a struggle—a long struggle—reason and common sense prevailed. The romance of her life was done and ended, Laura Ingram told herself, but the reality remained. She would have no troubles about money as George Gifford’s wife, and she would make him a good wife. He should never regret his generosity and kindness to her ; he should never know that the very essence that makes marriage sacred was absent from her heart.

So, when he came the next day,

nervous and anxious—for he really loved her—Laura received him with a blush and a smile. He took her hand, he looked into her face, and something there gave him hope.

‘Will you give me your answer now?’ he asked, a little tremulously.

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, in a low tone, with her eyes cast down.

‘Laura, will you be my wife?’

‘Yes,’ again answered Laura, and, when he heard the welcome monosyllable, he caught her in his arms and kissed her sweet lips.

‘My dear, dear girl! You have made me so happy!’ he exclaimed, and he stood there holding both her hands, his heart full of infinite content.

‘I am sure my father will be

pleased,' he said presently. 'You will make the old house quite bright, Laura.'

'I will do my best,' she answered softly.

'And I will do my best to make you happy.'

'I am sure you will.'

'And you won't mind settling down in a country town, will you, dear?' inquired George Gifford, with just a touch of anxiety in his tone.

'Oh, no, I have not found much happiness here,' answered Laura, and she suppressed a sigh as she spoke.

'Well, you know, we can run up to London whenever you like,' said George Gifford cheerily. 'You'll want to come up about your books and

stories, won't you? But perhaps you won't write now?'

'We shall see,' smiled Laura.

'Well, just as you please; at all events, you need not do it for the sake of pocket-money,' replied George Gifford, also smiling.

'It has not brought me in much pocket-money.'

'Never mind, you shall have pocket-money without it. And now, Laura, dear, let us sit down and talk it all over. To begin with, I hope you won't think me selfish when I ask for our marriage to be very soon.'

'Why very soon, George?'

'Well, to tell you the truth, I don't like leaving you alone in London any longer. I suppose I am jealous,' he added, with a laugh, 'but there it is!

You are too handsome to be alone, Laura, and want your husband to take care of you.'

Laura sighed softly.

'And why should we wait?' continued George Gifford in his practical way. 'There is nothing to wait for. We have both made up our minds, and I want to take my dear wife with me when I go home this time.'

'Not this time?'

'Yes, this time. I don't want to leave you any more, Laura. I will write and tell my father to-day that we have settled it all, and we can be married quite well in a day or two.'

'Oh, that is too soon.'

'No, indeed, it's not. Come, Laura, if you will give way to me about

this, I'll give way to you often and often.'

Laura was silent.

'I want you to promise,' urged George Gifford, taking her hand.

But Laura still hesitated.

'Don't you think it would be better to wait a few weeks?' she said.

'No, indeed, I don't! This is Thursday; suppose we are married to-day week, for I'm afraid I can't take a very long holiday, and my father is getting too old to look after the business.'

'But you can come back?'

'No, dear, I don't want to lose sight of you. I would be fit for nothing down there worrying about you. Come, Laura, let us fix to-day week.'

And after a little more urging, and a little more delay, they did fix it. In

a week Laura was to be George Gifford's wife, and George Gifford finally left her to purchase the engagement ring, feeling entirely happy.

And what did Laura feel when he was gone?

She sat down and sighed after the door closed behind him, and put her slender hand over her face. And a face—strong, dark and intellectual—not George Gifford's face, rose before her mental vision.

'I hope I shall never see him more; I pray I shall never see him more,' she thought, and then again she sighed. But presently she roused herself.

'How weak I am,' she said, half aloud, 'even to think of him, when he has quite forgotten me, and I have promised to be the wife of another man.'

Of a good man; a kind man, who will give me a sheltered home, and whom I truly like. And he seems so happy, too—almost like a boy—and I must try to make him always so.'

In the meanwhile George Gifford was hurrying to a jeweller's shop, where he purchased a very handsome diamond engagement ring, a plain gold wedding ring, and a pearl keeper. They had settled to go out in the afternoon, and he wished to take his rings with him when he returned to Edgware Road. Then he went back to his hotel, and wrote the following letter to his father at Suffolk:—

'MY DEAR FATHER,—I am going to give you a little surprise, but I hope it will be a pleasant one. I am going

to be married in a week to Miss Laura Ingram, and when I return home I hope to bring my wife with me. I have wished this for a long time; and before Laura left Suffolk, at the time of the old Major's death, I proposed to her, but we did not become engaged at that time. However, we have settled it all now, and I hope you will be fond of your new daughter, and I am sure she will be worthy of your affection. As I shall be absent about a fortnight or three weeks longer, I have written some directions to Johnson at the office, but have requested him to consult you before acting in any matter. I propose to settle the seven thousand pounds my dear mother left me on Laura, but this matter can wait over until

my return.—And I remain, dear father,
your affectionate son,

‘GEORGE GIFFORD.’

This letter sped on its way, and was delivered the next morning at a tall, handsome, red house, standing in the Market Place of Suffold, which contained some of the best houses in the town.

Red House was, however, the most imposing-looking of them all. It stood back from the street, and had a small railed-in garden in front and a large old-fashioned garden at the back, where grew and flourished apricot, apple and pear trees, flowers and sweet-smelling herbs of every description.

The old man—Mr George Gifford, senior—was fond of his garden, and

spent a considerable sum of money on it yearly. He had walked in it with his fair young wife by his side; she had planted yon rose-tree clambering on the wall; their boy had played in it. In fact, a hundred tender recollections were connected in Mr Gifford's mind with this well-kept piece of ground; and now, with his bowed, white head, he walked daily in it still. He was a fine-looking, elderly man, and was held in high repute among his fellow townsmen. For one thing, he was known to be rich; for another, his character for honour and just dealing had never been impugned.

And now, let us look at the old lawyer on the morning that George Gifford's letter arrived at Suffolk in

which he announced his intended marriage to Laura Ingram. He was sitting with his back to the window at the breakfast-table, with double gold-rimmed glasses on his well-shaped nose, reading the morning papers. His clear skin made him look younger than he was, though both his hair and whiskers were white. He was, in fact, over seventy, but carried his years well, and looked in good if not robust health.

Opposite to him at the breakfast-table sat his niece, Miss Anna Lindsay. She also had a clear skin, and a well-shaped nose, and reddish-tinted, abundant hair, in which there were, however, many lines of grey. But she was a good-looking woman, and her form was full and comely. Her eyes

were very peculiar. They were of a remarkably light reddish-brown tint, and her eyelashes were scant. She was, it was said, middle-aged, but she did not admit this. She called herself the same age as her cousin George, and had ever since her arrival at Red House determined to remain there as its future mistress.

She was talking pleasantly to her uncle when a neat maid brought in the letters on a silver salver. There were two; one for Mr Gifford and one for Miss Lindsay; and as she placed them on the table Miss Lindsay at once recognised her cousin George's handwriting.

'This is from George,' she said to her uncle, rising and putting it in his

hand; 'I suppose it will be to let us know when he is coming back.'

Mr Gifford opened the envelope, and settled his glasses more evenly on his nose, and then commenced to read his son's letter, and Miss Lindsay was so interested to hear the news about her cousin that she left her own letter unopened.

'Why, bless me!' cried old Mr Gifford the next minute, in a tone of utter astonishment, 'whoever would have believed this?'

'What is the matter?' asked Anna Lindsay, rising, and a sudden flush rose to her face as she spoke.

'Why, George is going to be married—actually married—in a week to Miss Ingram, you know, the old

Major's daughter — well, I am surprised !'

No word came from Anna Lindsay's lips. Her face blanched suddenly ; she grasped the back of her chair as if for support, and her breath came in strange, heaving, painful gasps.

'I never knew there was anything between them,' continued the old lawyer ; 'yet he says he offered to her when her father died, which is more than a year ago now. Well, she's a handsome girl—but you didn't know her, Anna, she had left Suffolk before you came here.'

Still Miss Lindsay did not speak. In fact, she could not ; her tongue seemed paralysed ; her lips refused to utter ; and her uncle, surprised by her silence, looked up from his son's letter,

and glanced at his niece's white face.

‘Why, Anna, what is the matter? How ill you look,’ he said.

‘It is nothing,’ muttered Anna Lindsay, hoarsely, and then, without another word, she walked feebly to the door. She had had a great and terrible shock, and for the first time a dim consciousness of the truth dawned on her uncle's mind. He had never dreamed that she had ever thought of George in any other light than as a cousin before. For one thing, she was older than George; and, for another, George had always spoken of her somewhat carelessly. But, after she had almost staggered from the room, the old man sat feeling very uncomfortable. He was fond of his niece,

and he began to be afraid that George had not treated her well.

‘Poor Anna! I’m afraid she’s put out about this engagement,’ he thought uneasily. ‘Well, it’s too sudden. George should have consulted me a bit, I think—and yet young men will be young men;’ and he sighed, remembering his own youth, and his ardent wooing of the woman he had loved.

At all events, George’s letter prevented two people eating their breakfasts. Mr Gifford felt no appetite, and Miss Lindsay did not return to the room. She had retired to her own, feeling that one blow had made her future life utterly desolate.

CHAPTER II.

AT RED HOUSE.

SHE had, in truth, cared for her cousin George with an overwhelming love. She had never remembered her years nor her grey hairs. She had been, of course, constantly thrown with him for many months, and, being a good-looking, personable woman, she had never doubted that in time he would return her attachment. Once or twice she had made her feelings rather evident, and George had drawn back

warily, Therefore she had determined to wait. She was an excellent housekeeper, and knew that men like well - cooked and well - ordered meals, and so she devoted her energies to these points, and everything was served to perfection at Red House after her arrival there.

And now to hear that George was engaged, that he was actually to be married in a week, that he would bring his wife in all likelihood to the very house, where she had reigned so long as mistress, filled her heart with alternate paroxysms of rage, despair and misery.

She locked the door of her room and flung herself passionately on the floor, writhing there like a creature who had received a mortal wound.

‘Why was I born, why was I born?’ she moaned in her anguish.

No tears came to her relief, but there was a choking sensation in her throat, and she gasped as if for breath. And she could do nothing! She was powerless to stop this marriage for one single day. And she knew also that George Gifford had given her no just cause for complaint. He had always been kind and good-natured to her, but nothing more. And now it was all over. She would be nothing to him, and this strange woman would take her place!

A baneful light came into her curious red-brown eyes. She clenched her well-formed hands and ground her strong, white teeth. Could she part them after marriage if she could not before? This

girl that he had picked up in London might have a past, and that past might not be all clear.

The woman's face hardened as the thought flashed through her brain. If she were wretched, they might become wretched too. She would take her revenge somehow; and, having come to this determination, she endeavoured to calm herself. She had a part to play, and she must play it. So when the lunch hour came she reappeared at her place at the table, and endeavoured to hide her bitter emotions from her uncle's kindly eyes. She only partly succeeded in this, but Mr Gifford felt sorry for her, and when he spoke of George's coming marriage he did not look in her face.

Miss Lindsay also spoke of it, and

asked Mr Gifford if he had written to George.

‘Not yet, my dear,’ answered the old lawyer; ‘it is all too sudden for my fancy. But, of course, George has known her for years, and was a good deal with her when he was engaged winding up her father’s affairs.’

‘And did Major Ingram leave any money?’ inquired Miss Lindsay.

‘Very little. He left everything in a sad jumble, and this girl went to London to try to support herself by her pen or her paint-brush, for she’s a clever, accomplished young lady, I am told, and very good-looking.’

Miss Lindsay winced.

‘However, we must make the best of it, whatever she is,’ continued the old gentleman. ‘She is George’s choice,

and I trust she will make him happy.'

'And will they live here, do you think?'

'Of course, they will live here, my dear; there is surely room for us all?'

'Oh, yes; but she may not like my being here.'

'My dear Anna, I asked you to live here, and this is your home as long as you choose to remain,' said Mr Gifford decidedly. And as he spoke Miss Lindsay rose and kissed the old man on the brow.

'Thank you, uncle,' she said; 'it would have grieved me very much to be obliged to part with you.'

'There is no question of parting,' he answered kindly. 'I look on you as a

daughter, and I mean to treat you as such.'

Tears rushed into Miss Lindsay's eyes, and she leaned her hand on her uncle's shoulder.

'I will try always to be a daughter to you,' she said, and so the little scene ended, and Miss Lindsay was satisfied, at least, that she would not lose her home.

In the meanwhile, the two most concerned in this conversation were busy making preparations for the event which had created such a sensation at Red House.

George Gifford was most generous to his betrothed in providing the necessary trousseau, and cashed the hundred pounds he had placed in the bank in her name, and placed the money in her hand, as

well as the fifty pounds he had already given her.

To Laura a hundred and fifty pounds seemed quite a little fortune to spend on her own adornment, as in her father's time her pocket-money had been of a very scant description.

But imagine her astonishment when one day George brought a letter to her from his father, which the old man had enclosed in one to his son, and in this letter to Laura there was a cheque for five hundred pounds.

‘I send the cheque,’ wrote Mr Gifford, in his crabbed somewhat feeble handwriting, ‘for you to buy yourself a wedding present with. You will know better what you like than I could select for you, as I am

an old-fashioned man, and do not understand about ladies' dress or jewellery. But I wish to give you something to show that my new daughter is welcome to me, and I send you my hearty congratulations. George has been a good son to me, and I am sure he will make you a good husband. Trusting soon to see you at Red House,—I remain, yours sincerely, GEORGE GIFFORD, Senior.'

'Oh, George! how kind, how good of him,' said Laura, after she had read this letter, and saw the amount of the cheque. 'You must take this money as my little fortune, George,' she added, placing the cheque in his hand, but George refused to receive it.

'No, thank you, dear,' he said,

laughing, 'this is my father's present to you, and I've no doubt you'll find plenty to do with it in Paris when you get there.'

Thus, for the first time in her life, Laura had plenty of money at her command, and bought pretty gowns and bonnets and hats to please George, who delighted to see her well dressed. There was no shabby black frocks to be seen now, and Laura became her new garments wonderfully, and selected them with great taste and judgment. She looked indeed a most graceful, handsome young woman during the few remaining days before her marriage, and George Gifford felt vastly proud of her, and was only sorry there were so few people in town to see him

daily with the beautiful girl so soon to be his wife.

And we must not suppose that all these changes were unobserved downstairs in the house in Edgware Road. At first Mrs Fryer could not make it out, and she confided to her friend Mrs Pond that she thought 'it looked remarkably queer.'

'The parcels that come in are beyond everything, and she dresses as fine as a queen now; her who till this gentleman came had scarcely a rag to her back.'

But what was her excitement when one morning Laura rang the bell and asked to see her, to tell her she would no longer require the rooms.

'I am going to be married to Mr Gifford on Thursday morning, Mrs

Fryer,' she said quietly, 'and after that will leave here.'

The landlady's face fell visibly.

'Oh, indeed, miss! Well, I thought something must be going on, but was in hopes you might remain with me, as we've been so comfortable.'

'But Mr Gifford lives in the country,' smiled Laura.

'Well, I hope you'll be happy, with my best respects; of course, miss, you'll not forget I was to have a month's notice before leaving.'

'No, I shall not forget,' answered Laura, still smiling. 'I will pay you for a month from to-day.'

'And if you could recommend me, miss, I'll be much obliged; or if you and Mr Gifford come to stay in town in the season I'll be proud to have

you here. I'm sure he's a fine, pleasant-looking gentleman as ever I saw. As I said to my neighbour Mrs Pond, the first day he set his blessed feet over the doorstep, "I never, Mrs Pond,' says I, "saw a finer, handsomer gentleman;" those were my very words.'

Laura could not help giving a little laugh. This woman, who had been so insolent, so careless, in the days of her poverty, was now all flattery and smiles.

'I owe it all to you, George,' she said, an hour later, putting her hand gratefully into her lover's, who bent down and kissed it with his honest lips.

'And what do I owe to you, my darling?' he answered. 'You have made me the happiest of men.'

He never saw that Laura's heart was not his. His mind was not acute enough to realise the great difference between them. But Laura saw this more plainly every day. He was everything that was kind and thoughtful, but she often found she had very little to say to him. George talked of Red House, and the furniture; and Laura's thoughts wandered away as he did so. George talked of his business and the money he meant to settle on her, and he laughed a little, not unkindly though, at Anna Lindsay; but Laura was not interested. She had none of the deep, sweet happiness which glows in the hearts of loving brides thinking of the coming days to be spent with *him*. His home was to be hers, but she did not care to talk about it. She was

most grateful to him, but she felt the time he spent with her sometimes very long.

But the days passed away, and there was much to be done and thought of during the time of their brief engagement. George insisted on ordering two bridescakes, one to be sent to Suffold, and the other to Edgware Road. He declared it would not be lucky to have none at the house from which they were to be married. They had settled that Laura was to be married in her travelling costume, but they were to return to Edgware Road after the ceremony for lunch, and also to collect their luggage.

On the night before they were married he brought his bridal gift for her acceptance — a thin, slender gold

necklet, binding together seven diamond stars. It was a beautiful thing, and he claimed the privilege of clasping it for the first time round her white throat.

‘Fancy me having diamonds, George!’ she said.

‘No one could look better in them,’ he answered with a pleased smile.

In fact no man was ever happier at the prospect of his marriage than George Gifford. He was proud and fond of his future wife, and never saw the strange, wistful far-away look that sometimes crept into Laura’s dark eyes.

But the swift hours fled on, and in the pale summer dawn Laura awoke to the knowledge that this was her wedding day. It seemed all so strange! She was going back to the very town

she had left, meaning never to return ; going back with George Gifford, whom she had never meant to marry.

‘ Our lives are not in our own keeping,’ she thought ; ‘ we float hither and thither as the stream bears us onwards, and never can tell where we shall find ourselves.’

And this certainly seemed very true with her, for actually when she went down to breakfast she found a letter awaiting her from the publisher of her novel, informing her that he hoped that the book was going to be a success after all, or at least certainly not a failure as he had feared. He, too, requested her to be good enough to call at his office, and expressed a hope that he might also publish the next work she gave to the world.

Laura sighed deeply as she read this letter, and sat down to think. If this letter had come a week ago this would not have been her wedding day! She knew this only too well. She had promised to marry George Gifford to escape the miserable uncertainty of her position. And now, and now—

A ring at the house door interrupted her reflections, and a minute later George, radiant in a white waistcoat, with a white flower in his button-hole, hurried into the room, carrying a beautiful bouquet as an offering to his bride.

‘I ordered it yesterday at Covent Garden,’ he said with some pride. ‘They’ve not done it badly, have they, darling?’

‘It is too lovely,’ answered Laura, with her face bent over the white

blossoms, and with a strange fluttering at her heart. 'Read that,' she added the next minute, putting the publisher's letter into his hand.

'Oh, he's singing a different tune now,' said George, after he had finished it. 'Well, thank goodness, publishers need be nothing to you now.'

'I must write to him to-day,' answered Laura.

'Oh, don't bother ; let him wait ; you can write to him from Paris.'

'Very well,' said Laura, and the subject was dropped, but Laura thought of it more than once on her wedding day.

The quiet ceremony took place at eleven o'clock, and Laura Ingram became George Gifford's wife. She looked pale, but her lips did not falter as she

spoke the solemn words which bound her life to his. She was dressed in a rich soft grey silk, and looked very handsome, even Mrs Fryer admitted, who, with her friend Mrs Pond, had hastily followed the carriage which had conveyed the bride and bridegroom to church.

‘Well, who would have thought she would have made such a fine end,’ whispered Mrs Fryer in Mrs Pond’s ear, as they watched the two standing before the altar; ‘I’m certain many a time before he came she hadn’t enough to eat.’

‘There’s ups and downs wherever you turn,’ responded Mrs Pond philosophically, ‘and it’s her turn to be up this day.’

It was all over almost as the two women spoke. George and Laura had vowed to be true to each other as long as they both should live, and each certainly meant to keep their troth. Then George kissed his wife very tenderly, and they went into the vestry to sign their names, and Mrs Fryer and Mrs Pond hurried home as fast as they had come, gossiping as they went.

The newly-made husband and wife returned to Mrs Fryer's for lunch, and then started on their bridal trip to Paris, delighting Mrs Fryer's heart before they went by leaving the brides-cake behind them, as well as sundry bottles of champagne in which to drink their health. George also telegraphed to his father, and the following tele-

gram arrived at Red House an hour after they were married:—

‘All right; we were married this morning; off to Paris. GIFFORD.’

A white-faced woman read these words, and a cold and bitter pang shot through her heart. It was all over, then. Perhaps she had kept hoping that something unforeseen might occur to prevent the marriage, but she could have no such delusion now. George was married; the man she had loved was another woman’s husband, and Anna Lindsay’s life, to her mind, was wrecked, and her happiness ended.

Her uncle had given her the telegram to read, and as he glanced at her one moment he saw her white

drawn face, and drew his own conclusions. But he said nothing. Anna Lindsay tried to say a few words, and then turned away, and went through the rest of the day as best she could. She was forced to endure it, but not less did she suffer her silent pain.

Then in a few days came a letter from George, a letter full of 'dear Laura,' and his own happiness.

'I am so glad I brought dear Laura here,' he wrote, 'as she has never been in Paris before, and is delighted with it. We go shopping, and have great fun, and I am turning a regular domestic man, and carry parcels, etc., quite meekly.'

'A regular bridegroom's letter,' said old Mr Gifford, smiling, after he had

read his son's words, which were bubbling all over with his own joy. But he did not give it to his niece to read.

‘Well, well,’ he added, returning it to its envelope, ‘they’ll settle down in time.’

‘Does he say anything about the time he will return?’ asked Miss Lindsay, with faltering lips.

‘In a fortnight, he thinks. I’m sure I wish he was back, as we get on very badly without him at the office,’ answered Mr Gifford.

Miss Lindsay asked no more questions. She did not want to read the ‘regular bridegroom’s letter,’ or to hear about the bride. She hated her already, and her very name was gall and wormwood to her soul.

Other letters came from George, and finally the day of their return was fixed.

Mr Gifford gave his niece a cheque to buy some new furniture and curtains for the rooms intended for the newly-wedded pair, and Anna Lindsay bought these grudgingly, and made all arrangements with a bitter heart. And she grew very restless as the time drew near for the bride's arrival at her new home. The old man also grew a little nervous. He had come to the age when most people dislike change. And George's marriage was sure to bring many changes in the quiet household.

At last the momentous day dawned, and George telegraphed to his father that they were in town, and would be at Suffolk by dinner time.

Miss Lindsay ordered the dinner with a gloomy brow, and wondered if this would be the last one she would be

expected to give orders in the house. Mr Gifford brought out some of his best wine, and the maids donned new caps and aprons, and everyone was anxious to have a look at the bride.

And about seven o'clock on a bright evening, early in September, Laura re-entered the town where she had lived with her father, and where, during the closing months of her residence there, she had gone through such mental distress and pain.

She thought of this as George handed her from the train; as she stood waiting on the platform for him to collect her luggage, and as the two drove together to Red House in the carriage George had requested to be in readiness for them.

It seemed all so familiar to Laura,

and yet so strange. There were the very shops she used to deal with, but somehow they seemed to have dwindled, and the whole town grown smaller.

‘How do you think the old place looks?’ asked George, taking her hand. ‘Welcome back to Suffold, my darling.’

It must be admitted that Laura thought the old place looked very dreary.

Suffold is just one of those country towns where everything and everyone seem fast asleep. On market days—the Saturdays—there is a little more life. The country folks around come in to buy their groceries, that is the women-folk, and the men to sell their sheep and cattle, and drink together over their bargains.

To Laura, fresh from Paris and

London, the quiet, empty streets seemed inexpressibly dull, but she did not tell her thoughts to George.

‘It feels strange coming back,’ she said, bending out of the carriage.

‘It will a bit, at first, but that will soon wear off, and I think you’ll like Red House. Anna Lindsay has been doing it up very smart for us, I hear. I wonder how you will like Anna? I am sure you will be fond of my father.’

‘I hope he will be fond of me,’ answered Laura gently, and she turned round and looked at George with a smile.

She was looking very well, and was dressed in a grey French travelling cloak, and a large grey felt hat, with long grey feathers. She was a graceful,

distinguished-looking woman as she sat there by her husband's side, and George felt, not unreasonably, very proud of her. Then they turned into the market-place, and a few minutes later the carriage drew up in front of Red House, and the bride and bridegroom were at home.

Jealous eyes were watching for them, and kindly ones. The door flew open, and servants ran down the door steps, and George saw his father's white head, who was waiting to welcome them in the hall. He handed Laura out of the carriage, he drew her arm through his, and led her up the steps to the house, and there his father met them, and warmly extended his hand to Laura.

‘This is my new daughter, I suppose,’

he said, smiling. 'Welcome home, my dear.'

A little behind old Mr Gifford stood a lady with reddish hair turning grey. This was Miss Lindsay, who was pale and agitated, and her red-brown eyes were fixed jealously on the bride.

But even she secretly acknowledged her grace and beauty. It made her more bitter, but she could not deny it.

'Well, Anna, how are you?' cried George, after shaking his father's hand, holding his hand kindly to Anna Lindsay. 'Anna, this is my wife; this is my cousin Anna, dear.'

The wife and cousin shook hands also, and Laura wondered what made Miss Lindsay's face so pale. Could she have

seen into her heart her own also might have paled. The woman whose hand she just had taken had vowed to mar the happiness of the young wife.

CHAPTER III.

LIFE IN A COUNTRY TOWN.

MISS LINDSAY had certainly ordered a very good dinner for the entertainment of the bride, yet when old Mr Gifford offered his arm to his son's wife, and led her to the head of the table opposite his own seat, Anna Lindsay felt a fresh pang in her envious breast.

Laura was looking very handsome, and the excitement of her new surroundings had becomingly flushed her oval cheeks. She wore a French dress

of moss green silk, and rich white lace ruffles at wrist and throat, and when she had been dressing George had gone out into the garden and gathered her some white roses.

Altogether he had every reason to be proud of her, and proud he certainly was. He saw his father's kindly eyes resting on her face, and we may be sure that his own did also. Laura exerted herself to be charming, and old Mr Gifford declared after dinner, over his old port, that he had quite fallen in love with her. This delighted George. He began to recount how clever she was; how they had called by his request at the publisher's of her novel as they passed through town, and how civil and complimentary he had been.

‘He has asked her to write another book for him,’ said George, proudly, ‘and, of course, she may, just to amuse herself, but, as I told the publisher, she has no need to write now.’

‘No, of course, not,’ answered his father, sipping his port, ‘still if she has talents it seems a pity to waste them.’

‘She has got a husband to work for her now,’ continued George proudly. But he said nothing of the dire straits from which he had relieved her. This was a subject never mentioned at Red House; indeed, George had asked Laura to say nothing about it.

‘There is no good in telling everything, my darling,’ he had said in his sensible way. ‘We can keep our own counsel; and it was one of the hap-

piest moments in my life when you wrote and told me of your troubles, for it showed you trusted me.'

Thus neither old Mr Gifford nor Anna Lindsay had the slightest idea to what great poverty Laura had been reduced before she had married George. Mr Hay, the banker at Suffolk, had an idea, but he was a discreet man, and said nothing about it, not caring to run the risk of offending one of the best depositors at the bank.

In the meanwhile, when George, it must be admitted, was boasting somewhat of her abilities and beauty to his father, Laura and Miss Lindsay were carrying on rather a strained conversation in the drawing-room. Miss Lindsay was a woman that knew nothing of books or pictures; nothing, in fact, that

was in the least interesting to Laura. She had always lived in a narrow groove, and her mind was content to dwell therein. Servants and gossip were her themes. Had she had children, they, no doubt, would have been inflicted on her friends. But she had missed this most amiable of commonplace subjects. Therefore Laura and she had nothing to say to each other. She was also full of envy of Laura's dress and general appearance. The Parisian-made gown, the rich lace were wormwood and gall to her.

'So absurd dressing as if she were going to a dinner party,' she sat thinking. She was conscious that her own black silk had been made two years ago, and by a country dressmaker. The sleeves were old-

fashioned, and the skirt hung badly, and these faults did not add to Miss Lindsay's good-temper. She was a good-looking woman in her way, but what chance had she to look well, she thought bitterly, by the side of this over-dressed creature.

So when George and his father came into the drawing-room they found the ladies almost in silence. Then Miss Lindsay rose and rang for tea and coffee, and proceeded to arrange a card-table, and laid out two packs of cards.

'I suppose you play whist, Mrs George?' she said, looking sourly at the bride.

'No, indeed I do not; I cannot endure cards,' answered Laura, smilingly.

‘That is a pity,’ continued Miss Lindsay, ‘as my uncle is extremely fond of his rubber, and you would have made the fourth if you had played. We used to play with a dummy.’

‘Never mind me, my dear Anna,’ said old Mr Gifford, good-temperedly.

‘Oh, but I do mind you, uncle, and I know you enjoy your rubber. We must play with a dummy to-night?’

‘No,’ said George, who had seated himself by the side of his young wife. ‘I am not going to play to-night, and Laura is tired with her journey, and so we’ll not sit up late.’

Miss Lindsay said nothing more. She put away the cards with an injured air, and she went and sat

beside her uncle, who speedily dozed over in a nap into his easy chair.

‘It’s not good for him to sleep in his chair,’ remarked Miss Lindsay in a low tone when she saw this, ‘but he always does when he cannot get his rubber.’

‘I must try to learn to play,’ said Laura, and George looked at her gratefully.

On the whole Laura found her first evening at Red House anything but lively. Miss Lindsay was so entirely uncompanionable to her, that the idea of her constant society was far from agreeable.

And the next morning something annoying also occurred. After breakfast was over, and George and his

father had gone to the office, Miss Lindsay came into the room where Laura was sitting reading the newspapers, and addressed some words to her which she had evidently come in prepared to say.

‘About the housekeeping, Mrs George,’ she said; ‘shall I carry it on as usual?’

Laura looked up quietly from her paper.

‘No, I think I had better do that,’ she answered, ‘as I am George’s wife.’

Anna Lindsay’s clear skin flushed scarlet.

‘My uncle is very particular,’ she said in a voice that trembled with anger, ‘and do you think you are competent to order dinners and every-

thing? I thought authoresses were quite above being good housekeepers.'

'I must try to learn,' replied Laura, still quietly.

'Oh, very well, Mrs George! Then do you want to take possession of all the keys?'

'Yes, please I shall need them, you know, when I am looking after the housekeeping.'

Without another word Miss Lindsay flounced out of the room, and a few minutes later returned, carrying a key basket.

'There is the cellar key, Mrs George!' she said in tones of suppressed indignation, putting a large key down with unnecessary force on the table, 'and there is the store-closet key, and the linen-press key,

and the jam-closet key. Perhaps you would like the larder key also, but at present cook keeps that?’

Laura made no answer. Her clear skin flushed, and she put out her hand and drew the keys a little nearer to her, while Miss Lindsay’s red, brown eyes positively flashed with anger.

‘I can only say my uncle regards me as a daughter,’ she said, ‘yet the very second day you are in the house you wish to take all authority from me! I don’t know what my uncle will say.’

‘We had better inquire what he wishes; I naturally supposed, as George’s wife, I should be the mistress of the house,’ answered Laura, rising with some dignity of manner.

‘Oh! very well, I am not disputing it,’ sneered Miss Lindsay; ‘you have

got the keys, and I suppose I had best send cook up to you.'

'Thank you,' said Laura coldly, and Miss Lindsay retired from the room feeling that she was defeated, and with her heart full of animosity and bitterness.

But this little scene had been very unpleasant to Laura. And when the cook appeared for orders—a majestic woman, with white bibbed apron and cuffs, and a large, fat, flowery face—it must be admitted that Laura felt very much puzzled what to provide for dinner.

Mrs Nisbet, the cook, was, however, not disagreeable like Miss Lindsay. Perhaps she preferred a younger mistress, and concluded that her dealings in the matters of butter and dripping,

would not be looked after so sharply as during Miss Lindsay's reign. She therefore suggested the dishes that 'the old gentleman,' as she called her master, preferred. And on the whole Laura felt that the first dinner that she had ordered in Red House would not be a bad one. And this was certainly the case. Mrs Nisbet exerted herself to please her young mistress, and Miss Lindsay ate her dinner with a doubly disappointed heart.

But when George came in, and Laura told him about the keys, he was very angry.

'Why, of course, you are mistress,' he said. 'Do you say that woman was idiot enough to dispute it?'

'She was very disagreeable about it, at all events.'

‘This must be seen to; however I am glad, my darling, you took your proper place. But I must get my father to speak to Anna Lindsay; I shall have no more scenes of this sort.’

And old Mr Gifford did speak to Anna Lindsay, and added not a little to her rage against the new mistress.

‘My dear Anna,’ he said gravely, ‘George tells me you had some little dispute or other about who should be housekeeper. Of course, George’s wife is the mistress in the house, and housekeeper also.’

‘Then she has been making mischief already,’ said Miss Lindsay, her face turning very red, and her eyes filling with sudden tears.

‘She naturally told her husband that

something unpleasant had occurred. But there must be an end to all this. I will not have George's wife annoyed by anything of the kind. It was very unwise of you, Anna; you should remember that in a few years at most George will be master here and then you might lose your home.'

Miss Lindsay listened to these words with a sinking heart. The old lawyer had called her back into the dining-room to say them, and she saw he was entirely in earnest, and that he, as well as George, meant that she should take second place in the household.

'I meant nothing,' she said with a sob, but her emotion had no effect on Mr Gifford.

‘Let there be nothing more of the kind,’ he added. ‘And now that is enough, I hope I shall have no occasion to speak to you again.’

‘Very well, uncle,’ answered Miss Lindsay meekly. She saw, in fact, it was no use to say anything further, and she dare not quarrel with her uncle, as her future entirely depended on him. She had no money, and she had always cherished a hope that he would provide for her at his death.

So she determined to bide her time. She would be revenged on this inter-loper somehow she had made up her mind from the time she had heard of George’s marriage, but at present she could do nothing. She therefore made a sort of apology to Laura, who took it good-naturedly.

‘It is all right,’ she said, ‘let us say no more about it.’

And after this she tried to speak kindly of Anna Lindsay to George.

‘You see,’ she said, smiling, ‘she was sure not to like my coming here when she had been accustomed to order everything. You must tell me if I give you very bad dinners, George, and also what you like.’

‘You are sure to give me the very things I like without being told,’ answered George, who, indeed, could see no fault in his young wife, and was never weary of praising her.

But Miss Lindsay did not attempt to interfere in the household affairs after this, and made no comments on any failures which Laura sometimes committed. Laura, however, did her best to

please both her husband and his father, and to study their tastes. She even tried to learn whist, though this was most wearisome to her. In fact, it was very dull at Red House, and Laura sometimes regretted the struggling past.

The social aspect of Suffold was also not lively. Of course, everyone in the place remembered Laura Ingram, and the old Major, her father. The Major never went into company, but sometimes Laura had done so. Therefore, after her appearance with George at the church as his bride, all those she had known in her girlhood, and all the Giffords' friends and acquaintances called on her.

She had known the vicar's family, for the vicar, a well-meaning man, had done his best to be on good terms with his morose, reserved parishioner, Major In-

gram. But the Major himself had firmly resisted any social intercourse. He never went to church, and he never went into any house but his own. He, however, did not restrain Laura, and she had sometimes gone to parties at the vicar's, and the vicar's wife, a motherly woman, had been sorry for the motherless girl.

The vicar's two daughters, one of whom had been recently married to Mr Masterman, the senior curate, were two ordinary-looking, countrified girls. His son was an ordinary-looking, countrified young man. He was in the bank, and on very good terms with himself, which little weakness did not make him more attractive to others. In fact, they were an uninteresting family as a whole, but naturally did not themselves perceive

this. They had been very much astonished, and the ladies a little jealous, when they had heard of George Gifford's marriage to Laura Ingram. But the Giffords were people of importance in their eyes, for old Mr Gifford gave generously to all church matters. Therefore Mrs Brentwood, the vicar's wife, proposed that they should give a dinner-party in honour of George Gifford's wife.

A dinner-party was a serious affair to the Brentwoods. They were not rich, and so many had claims on them for invitations. Still it was advisable, and therefore Mrs Brentwood and her two daughters had many consultations about whom it would be best to ask to meet the bride.

Mrs Masterman was a sensible young woman, who had married a man

many years her senior, and a widower with four children. But Lucy Brentwood knew very well she could not pick and choose. The senior curate had chosen a lady for his first wife who had five thousand pounds, and he wanted someone to look after his motherless children. Thus it was arranged, and was, in fact, a mutual obligation. Lucy wanted a husband and a home; Mr Masterman a house-keeper and a head nurse. The marriage gave great satisfaction to Mr and Mrs Brentwood, and Lucy seemed quite satisfied with her elderly curate. She had been born and bred at Suffolk, and she knew by heart all the jealousies, the small cliques, and the petty ambitions of the place.

She advised her mother, in the

first place, to ask old Mrs Lynton to meet Mrs George Gifford. Old Mrs Lynton was not wealthy, but she possessed superior advantages as regards position to anyone in the town. Her husband had been a captain in the navy, and her only daughter had made what was considered a wonderfully good match. At a county ball in the neighbourhood, genial, jovial Sir Richard Danvers, a baronet, and a very rich man indeed, had seen and admired Lucinda Lynton, who was a handsome girl, and had very shortly afterwards proposed to her. Sir Richard came of a long line of wealthy brewers, who had amassed a vast fortune, and Sir Richard was said to have a hundred thousand a year at the very least.

It was a great change, therefore, to the fair Lucinda to go to Danvers Park and affluence, after spending many years of her young life in genteel poverty at Suffold. But to do Lady Danvers justice, she bore her honours very amiably. Danvers Park is about twenty miles from Suffold, but Lady Danvers did not forget her old mother or her old friends. She used to stay a few days with her mother at times, and she always on these occasions called on the vicar's family, and had more than once invited them to the magnificent country seat, which was now her home.

Therefore Mrs Lynton and her daughter Lady Danvers were in great repute at the vicarage. They spoke of Lady Danvers habitually as

‘dear Lady Danvers,’ and accordingly they decided to invite Mrs Lynton to meet Mrs George Gifford, the bride. They had first secured Laura and George, before they proceeded to invite their other friends, thus showing both prudence and good sense, as a dinner-party was a thing of great consideration in the limited vicarage household.

Mr and Mrs George Gifford having duly accepted the invitation, Mrs Lynton was then asked, and imagine their delight when a note arrived from her telling them that her ‘Dear daughter, Lady Danvers,’ would be with her for a few days at the very time of the dinner-party, and asking if she might accompany her to the vicarage.

The whole family of the Brentwoods were actually uplifted at the idea of entertaining Lady Danvers. But Mrs Brentwood, who was a prudent woman, advised them not to say anything about it in the town until her ladyship had really dined at the vicarage.

‘Something might happen to prevent her coming, you know, my dears,’ she said; ‘and you know, also, how spiteful people are; they might say we had just invented the whole thing.’

‘You are quite right, mother,’ answered Mrs Masterman. ‘I never saw such spiteful people as there are here. Did I tell you that I was told that Dorothy White said I never left William alone till I got him?’

‘Never mind, my dear,’ replied Mrs Brentwood, with a benign maternal smile mantling her face as she looked at her daughter; ‘you did get him, and that, perhaps, made Dorothy a little jealous.’

Which speech greatly comforted the senior curate’s wife.

CHAPTER IV.

A DINNER PARTY AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

ANNA LINDSAY was not invited to dine at the vicarage on the 30th day of September, and she felt this to be a great slight. She had dined there before Laura came to Red House, when her uncle and cousin were going, but she was left out now, and this added not a little to her anger and bitterness against the bride.

But poor Mrs Brentwood had not the least idea of hurting her feelings, or

slighting her in any way. She was obliged to do the best she could for her vicar and her family, and important parishioners were to be considered before a middle-aged lady of no importance.

Proper attention had been paid to the Gifford family when a dinner-party had been made expressly for the bride and bridegroom, and Mrs Brentwood could only do what she could with her small means.

There was Mr Hay, the manager of the bank where her son was a clerk, and an unmarried man, with a comfortable house above the bank, all ready for a wife, as it were. Mrs Brentwood had still a daughter to marry, and Jane Brentwood would be a very suitable wife for Mr Hay, her mother reflected.

Therefore Mr Hay received an invitation for the 30th. Then there was the junior curate, a tall, dark, close-shaven young parson, also a suitable husband for Jane, though he declared he was not a marrying man, and that marriage should not be for the priests of the Church. Mrs Brentwood, however, did not approve of this doctrine, and thought it savoured of Rome. But he might change his mind; young men had often fads, and there was no saying what might happen, thought Mrs Brentwood; so the closely-shaven junior curate was asked also. The doctor's family, too, were to be considered, to whom she and the vicar owed three dinners, and so on.

She 'could only dine sixteen,' as she herself expressed it, in her small dining-

room, so she did what she could, and invited those she thought were of the most use, or might be of use to her husband and children.

At last the important day arrived, and Mrs Brentwood's arrangements did credit to herself and her daughters' good management. The hired cook knew her business, and the hired waiters theirs. Mrs Masterman and Jane Brentwood had decorated the table and drawing-room with taste, and the very first guests to arrive were Lady Danvers and Mrs Lynton, her mother.

All the family bosoms glowed with triumph. There sat the gracious, handsome, smiling woman, whom Sir Richard Danvers had made his wife, as one after the other the rest of the party were announced. Lady Danvers knew

some of them, and did not know others, but they all knew her by name and reputation. Her husband was the richest man in the county, was a member of Parliament, a baronet, and the master of a pack of foxhounds. And Lady Danvers was a great lady, celebrated for her beauty, her sweetness and generosity. To dine with her at the same table was a compliment to themselves some of the guests silently reflected. And when George Gifford and his young wife entered the room, Lady Danvers, who knew George, pleasantly held out her hand to him.

‘How are you, Mr Gifford?’ she said, ‘and how is that dear old man, your father? I remember him so well.’

George, well pleased, replied suitably to her inquiries.

‘And this is your wife?’ continued Lady Danvers, looking admiringly at the graceful white clad figure by George’s side. ‘Please introduce me to her.’

George did so smilingly.

‘I am so glad to know you,’ said Lady Danvers, rising and taking Laura’s hand. ‘I hear you are an author? I love authors, my greatest ambition is to be one.’

‘You could be, I am sure, if you pleased, Lady Danvers,’ answered Laura.

‘I don’t know; I have all the wish, perhaps the feelings, to be one, but I may lack the power of describing these feelings so that they may touch other

people's hearts. It is a great gift, and must give you thousands of unknown friends.'

'I have not found that to be so,' answered Laura, with rather a sad little smile. 'My only book was supposed to be going to turn out a complete failure, but it is doing better now.'

'Don't quite believe about the failure, Lady Danvers,' said George with some pride in his tone. 'Her first book is doing so well that the publisher has asked her to write another, and has offered her quite a big sum for it.'

'Oh! George, I do not know what you call a big sum!' said Laura, modestly.

'Well, a considerable sum at any-rate, my dear,' replied George.

‘I must read the first one; I am dying to read it,’ said Lady Danvers, ‘and when I have met you I will read it with double interest. But, ah, here comes the vicar; we must have a long chat after dinner, Mrs Gifford.’

The portly form of the vicar had by this time approached the little group, and, murmuring something about the honour of escorting Lady Danvers in to dinner, he offered her his arm, which Lady Danvers took smilingly.

It had been originally fixed that the host had to take in the bride; but, of course, this was not to be thought of in the presence of Lady Danvers. Therefore George was requested to escort Mrs Brentwood, and Mr Masterman, the senior curate, took Laura. She found him a man slow and heavy

of discourse, and bent on enjoying the good and unusual luxuries spread before him. He solemnly partook of every dish offered to him, and each time the wine was carried round he permitted the waiters to fill his glass, until his Lucy looked at him anxiously, and so did his father-in-law, but from different motives. Lucy feared he was taking too much for his health's sake; the vicar, for his wine's sake.

Laura found it anything but lively. She looked at George, who also seemed to be enjoying his dinner, but in moderation. She looked at Lady Danvers, and thought she had never seen so charming a face. It was not only handsome, but so bright and full of animation. The vicar, even in spite of his

private anxieties, could not help complimenting her.

‘And how handsome your bride is,’ said Lady Danvers; ‘I have quite fallen in love with her.’

‘She is a fine young woman,’ answered the vicar, with his eyes fixed uneasily on the waiters.

‘It is such a clever face; she has, I am sure, a vivid imagination, and a warm and tender heart.’

This was a little beyond the vicar; besides, at this moment one of the waiters was recklessly opening an unneeded—in the vicar’s opinion—bottle of champagne.

Laura was, in truth, looking very beautiful. She wore a soft, white silk dress, made in Paris, and the slender gold chain, with the seven diamond

stars, that George had given her as a bridal gift. While in Paris he had purchased her diamond earrings and a beautiful diamond star for her dark hair. She carried a large white bouquet, and a white feather fan, and, altogether, her appearance was very striking.

But she was very glad when the dinner was over and when the ladies returned to the drawing-room. When there, Lady Danvers at once took possession of her. She sat down by her side, and asked her all about publishing and publishers.

‘How I envy you!’ she cried. ‘To live at will in an ideal world!’

‘But unfortunately the real world will also step in,’ answered Laura, with a smile.

‘I should shut my door on it if I

were you. I should live with my own people, the children of my brain, the ideal men and women I created at my will.'

'I used to think like that, Lady Danvers, in my young girlhood, but,' and Laura sighed, 'it did not content me.'

'No ; you married?'

'Yes,' answered Laura, with a certain reserve in her tone that Lady Danvers' quick ears instantly caught.

'Well, do not think me rude,' said Lady Danvers, looking at her, 'but I think Mr Gifford has been a most fortunate man to marry so gifted a wife. We must really be friends, Mrs Gifford. I will, if you will permit me, call on you to-morrow, and then you must come out and visit me at the Park. What

delicious conversations we shall have. I delight in talking to you, and after the good vicar—'

And Lady Danvers shrugged her handsome shoulders.

Laura laughed.

'I shall be delighted if you will come and see me, Lady Danvers, and I assure you the vicar is amusing to the senior curate.'

'Oh, that is the long lean man in black, who devoured everything before him? I watched him because I was looking at you. You attracted me.'

'Then the attraction was mutual. I could not help looking at you.'

'How delightful to have found a friend at first sight. I believe in occult and mysterious links, you know, between

two souls. In what other world have we known each other?’

‘It is strange how we are drawn to some, while with others, though they are good, and everything that is kind, a stone wall lies between us.’

‘It is so,’ said Lady Danvers, and in a moment she seemed to understand.

This handsome girl had married, but a mental wall lay between her and the man to whom she was mated.

And she did not wonder at this when a few minutes later George Gifford came into the drawing-room and went up to the couch on which Lady Danvers and his wife were sitting. George was sensible, a little commonplace, and by no means imaginative. He was pleased to see Lady Danvers talking to his wife, and he joined in the conversation, which

suddenly became commonplace, too. But Lady Danvers was a woman of the world, and she knew it too well to expect always to be amused or entertained. She talked to George for the sake of his wife, and then the closely-shaven curate with Roman Catholic tendencies joined the group where the only two pretty women in the room were sitting, and proved himself a good conversationalist and a young man of some culture and taste.

Altogether Lady Danvers could say with some truth, which she did, that she had enjoyed herself, as she was taking leave of her hostess.

‘So pleased to have seen you, more than pleased, Lady Danvers,’ smiled the delighted and gratified Mrs Brentwood.

The vicar took her to the carriage,

and the closely-shaven curate followed with white-haired, venerable Mrs Lynton, as to be near the rose was something. Then George and Laura took their departure, and Laura also told Mrs Brentwood that she had enjoyed herself. The family felt the party had been a success, and that all the money spent had not been in vain. Only the vicar out of whose pocket it came felt rather depressed. There were the waiters to pay, and a great deal of wine had been consumed.

‘I never saw a man drink so much as Masterman did,’ he grumbled to his wife afterwards in the privacy of their own apartment.

But kindly Mrs Brentwood soothed him.

‘Never mind, John,’ she said, ‘it’s

only once in a way, and it all went off very well, and it was such a thing to have Lady Danvers here.'

'Uncommonly handsome woman,' remarked the vicar, mollified, putting on his night - cap, and remembering how Lady Danvers had said Sir Richard would be pleased to see him at the Park. 'Yes, I suppose it did go off very well, and George Gifford's wife is a pretty woman, too.'

'Yes, but then her dress would have made anyone look well.'

'Don't know about that,' and then presently his mind once more reverted to his son-in law's delinquencies.

'I tell you what it is, Sarah,' he said, just as Mrs Brentwood was falling asleep, 'when Masterman dines here on the Sundays, in future, I shall

never produce anything but a shilling a bottle claret.'

But let us leave this worthy couple to their well-earned repose, and see what the effect of the dinner-party was at Red House. George had gone home with Laura in a state bordering on elation. He was so proud of his wife; so proud of her beauty, and the attention that she had received from Lady Danvers, that he could not keep it to himself.

'I say, little woman,' he said, putting his arm round her slender waist as soon as they were seated together in the carriage, 'you did look a great swell to-night.'

'I am glad you thought I looked well, George,' answered Laura gently.

'I should think you did look well! You and Lady Danvers are the two

prettiest women I have seen for many a long day; and she seemed to take quite a fancy to you, too.'

'She seemed very nice; she said she would call; I wonder if she will?'

'She is sure to call if she said she would; well, my little girl, I consider you quite a success.'

And George's elation had by no means worn off by the morning. He went down to breakfast with a smile on his face, and had scarcely seated himself at the table when he began to talk to his father and Anna Lindsay about the party.

'Oh, it was quite a grand affair, I assure you,' he said, in answer to his father's inquiry how he enjoyed himself. 'Lady Danvers was there, looking splendid, and asked so kindly after

you, father, and said she remembered you so well.'

'She was a beautiful girl,' answered the gratified old man.

'And she's a beautiful woman now, and she took quite a fancy to my little Laura, and said she was going to call, and invited us to the Park, and no end of things. She admired Laura immensely, and no wonder, for Laura looked positively lovely last night.'

At this moment Laura entered the room.

'Come and sit here, Laura,' said George, rising, and offering her a chair. 'I've been telling father how you quite made a conquest of Lady Danvers last night.'

'She was very kind to me, at least,' answered Laura, smiling.

‘And she said she was coming here to call on you, dear, didn’t she?’

‘Yes, George, she said she was.’

‘Quite an honour,’ sneered Anna Lindsay.

‘Well, so it is, Anna,’ said George sturdily. ‘A woman in Lady Danvers’ position does not go calling about on everyone.’

‘Oh, no, I daresay not,’ replied Anna. ‘When did she say she was coming to call, then?’ And she looked at Laura, as she wished to be at home during Lady Danvers’ visit.

‘She said soon,’ answered Laura, who preferred to receive Lady Danvers alone.’

‘Oh, that may mean nothing. I heard she was staying at old Mrs Lynton’s. I believe she’s a very handsome woman.

I suppose she would be quite the belle last night?' said Anna Lindsay.

'Except Laura,' answered George, looking smilingly at his wife. 'They were the rival belles—no, the friendly belles,' he added, with a little laugh.

Anna Lindsay said nothing more, but she left the breakfast-room with a heart brimful with envy and discontent. And, when early in the afternoon she returned from a shopping expedition, determined to be in the house if Lady Danvers should happen to call that day, she heard, to her bitter chagrin, that she had already been there, and was gone.

'She was obliged to call early,' explained Laura, 'as she returns to the Park this afternoon.'

'So I have missed her, then,' said

Miss Lindsay. 'She knew the hour Lady Danvers was coming, and would not tell me,' she thought. 'Ah, well, my fine lady,' she mentally added, vindictively; 'it's your day now, mine may come.'

CHAPTER V.

LADY DANVERS AT HOME.

LADY DANVERS had made herself very charming to Laura during her early visit to Red House. She had heard from Sir Richard in the morning, and he wanted her home again, and had written to tell her that he would send a carriage for her early in the afternoon, therefore Lady Danvers had thus been compelled to call on Laura in the morning.

‘But I was determined not to go away without seeing you,’ she said. ‘I want you to promise to come to us at the

Park—you and Mr Gifford—for a week's visit at least.'

'It is very good of you to ask us; I shall be delighted to go, if Mr Gifford can spare the time,' answered Laura.

'Oh, he must! He must spare the time to bring you at least, and leave you with me, and return for you.'

'It is most kind of you, and it will be a great pleasure to be with you.'

'And so you used to live in this place in your girlhood, I am told?' said Lady Danvers, looking at her with interest. 'So did I, but I was married and gone before you had left school.'

'I remember seeing Mrs Lynton, and hearing that she had a daughter married to Sir Richard Danvers,' answered Laura, 'but I never expected to see you.'

‘It was fate!’ cried Lady Danvers, with a pretty little gesture of her small hands. ‘We were fated to meet, and to be friends. I knew it almost from the first moment that I looked in your face.’

‘I hope it may be so, with all my heart.’

‘It will be so. Between ourselves, you must find Suffold very dull?’

‘I used to think it very dull before my poor father’s death; very dull, indeed! Then I went to London, expecting to fight my own way up, but I found that a terrible struggle.’

‘And then you married Mr Gifford?’

‘Yes, he was very good to me always, and he did a great deal for me, and so—’

‘You married him—so wags the world!’

‘He is most good, most kind to me,’ said Laura, with an earnest ring in her voice.

‘I am sure he is—he is fond and proud of you. I could see it in his grey eyes.’

‘You are a quick observer, I see, Lady Danvers.’

‘I think I am. We don’t need to be told everything, you know.’

‘That is quite true; I wonder how it is?’

‘I judge people by their eyes. I watch their eyes, and seem to know almost what they are thinking. It’s not quite a pleasant gift though. You may see too much.’

‘And could you tell,’ and a sudden

flush passed over Laura's face, 'if a person really cared for you?'

'Do you mean a man or woman?'

'I mean a man — if a man loved you?'

'I think so. One great guide is if a man watches you while he is talking to other women.'

'Things are so strange,' said Laura wistfully.

'They are, because there are under-currents that we cannot see. As we sail on the sea of life, the hidden rocks are the dangerous ones.'

'You mean false friends?'

'And evil tongues — no one can tell what harm they do.'

Laura sighed, restlessly, and then Lady Danvers changed the conversation.

‘Is Mr Gifford a sportsman?’ she asked.

‘I believe he shoots a little,’ answered Laura.

‘Because we are to have a party of men coming to the party on the 12th to shoot. Suppose you fix to come then also? I wonder if that time will suit Mr Gifford?’

‘I can ask him.’

‘Please do—but now I must go. I will write to you from the Park to know if you can come on the 12th. I am looking forward to your visit.’

They parted on the friendliest terms, and Laura’s heart felt lighter after making Lady Danvers’ acquaintance. She was so bright and congenial, though life for these two women had worn such different aspects. One had

lived in the sunshine, the other in the shade, and yet they understood each other, and a strong mutual sympathy existed between them.

George also was very pleased when he heard of Lady Danvers' visit and invitation, and yet more pleased when in a day or two a charming letter arrived, from Danvers Park, pressing Laura to fix the day that she would go there.

'My husband is very anxious to make your acquaintance,' wrote Lady Danvers, 'as he says I have talked of no one else since I met you.'

In fact Lady Danvers knew how to write pretty things, as well as to say them, and did so with such charming grace and ease, that no wonder she was a general favourite.

‘She is certainly a most attractive woman,’ said George, after he had finished reading her letter. ‘May I show this to my father, Laura; I know it will please him so much?’

For Lady Danvers had not forgotten to be remembered very kindly to ‘Mr Gifford, senior,’ as well as to ‘your nice husband.’ And both Mr Gifford, senior, and the ‘nice husband’ were flattered by this little attention. Lady Danvers, in truth, would take any trouble to please people, and old people especially like thought and kindness from the young.

Mr Gifford showed Lady Danvers’ letter also to Anna Lindsay, and the terms it was written in filled her breast with bitter envy. But she dare

not say anything against it to her uncle, as she saw his unmistakable pleasure that his son's wife should have received such a compliment.

‘I suppose they will go?’ she said, after a minute's silence.

‘Of course they will go,’ answered old Mr Gifford, ‘and, no doubt, both Laura and George will enjoy themselves, as they like Lady Danvers so much.’

The invitation to Danvers Park was accordingly accepted, and, one bright fine day in October, the husband and wife started on a visit from which they expected much pleasure. George, a true business man, was glad to have the opportunity of making the personal acquaintance of Sir Richard Danvers, who with his great fortune was sure

often to require legal advice. He was glad, too, to have some pheasant shooting, as he was a fair shot, and rather proud of his skill. Laura was delighted at the idea of again seeing Lady Danvers, and they were therefore both in very good spirits during the short railway journey.

It had been arranged that a carriage should be sent for them to the station nearest the Park, and, when they reached this station, a well-appointed brougham was awaiting their arrival, and after a drive of about two miles, they neared the magnificent mansion which the present baronet's father had built.

The late Sir Richard Danvers had wisely raised his house on ground which had belonged to a noble family, who had grown poor, as he had grown rich.

But though he had pulled down the old mansion, he did not cut down the old trees. He reared his turrets and towers amid the great oaks whose leaves had quivered in the summer sunshine more than a hundred years. A splendid place, in truth, this Danvers Park, standing on its smooth lawns, facing the wide lake, with a great belt of trees at the back, and the vast grasslands of the park, spreading on every side.

A great change, indeed, it must have been to the handsome Lucinda Lynton, to leave a small house in Suffolk to dwell in this stately mansion.

‘It was like a fairy tale,’ she sometimes said; and some good fairy, by one tap of her wand, had brought

her great wealth, position, and a good husband. Beauty she had had before the eventful evening when she met Sir Richard Danvers, and he laid his vast possessions at her feet. But, at all events, she made a good use of them. A gracious, charming woman, the lady of Danvers Park was almost universally considered, and her house parties were famous for their brightness and life.

‘It’s well to be rich,’ said George, half-jealously, as they drove down the long avenue which led to one of the principal entrances of the house.

‘How beautiful it is,’ answered Laura, looking around. It was not envy, but there was a sort of

wistful feeling in her heart also, that it was well to dwell amid such fair surroundings.

‘I should like to sit and think or write all day under the shadow of these great trees,’ she was thinking. But she did not say this to George. George was reflecting what a great income a man must have to build and live in such a place. He was taking a sensible, practical view of Danvers Park and its owners, and Laura a sentimental one. There was an essential difference in their two characters, yet we have seen how George could act sentimentally, and Laura, practically.

But their thoughts were speedily interrupted, for a few minutes later the carriage stopped before one of

the principal entrances of the Park, and they were informed that Lady Danvers expected them, and they were at once ushered into a charming room, in which they found Lady Danvers and her little son.

Even as regarded her child her good fortune had not forsaken her. Dick, commonly called Dicky Danvers, was a handsome, sturdy boy of five, with his father's merry, blue eyes, and his mother's well-formed features. He was sitting at Lady Danvers' feet as George and Laura entered, and as she rose with outstretched hand to receive them, Dicky also rose, and made his best bow to his mother's guests.

'So pleased to see you,' said Lady Danvers kindly. 'Sir Richard

and the gentlemen are out shooting, but will be in presently. Sit here, Mrs Gifford, and allow me to introduce you to my little boy.'

'How are you, sir?' said Laura, smiling, and holding out her hand to the heir.

'Quite well, and how are 'ou?' replied Master Dicky. 'Are 'ou the pretty lady mother said was coming?'

'I'm afraid I can't be,' answered Laura, with a laugh.

Dicky fixed his merry blue eyes on her face, as if he was seriously considering the question.

'Yes she is, Dicky,' said Lady Danvers, smiling. 'You must know he is a great admirer of beauty, Mr Gifford,' she went on gaily.

‘He is accustomed to it, you see,’ answered George.

‘After which pretty speech you shall have some tea, or some wine? Ah, here is one of the sportsmen.’

The door of the room opened as she spoke, and a tall, dark man in a grey suit entered.

‘You promised me some tea if I came in early, Lady Danvers?’ said a voice so strangely familiar to Laura’s ears that she slightly started.

‘Yes, indeed, and I wish I could persuade Sir Richard to follow your good example,’ replied Lady Danvers. ‘Mrs Gifford, allow me to introduce Sir Ralph Woodland; Mrs Gifford, Sir Ralph Woodland.’

Sir Ralph turned his head and

bowed on being thus addressed, and for the first time his eyes fell on Laura's face. He recognised her in a moment. His expression changed, a flush passed over his dark skin, and he made a step forward as if to shake hands with her, but Laura, who had grown suddenly pale, merely bowed, and her eyes fell.

‘Mrs Gifford is an author, Sir Ralph, and she has come to pay me a visit; is it not charming?’ continued Lady Danvers, quite unconscious that the two had ever met before. ‘We must take her through some of the lovely glades in the park; and you must paint them in words,’ she added, looking at Laura.

Laura tried to speak, but somehow her voice failed her.

‘We admired the park greatly as we drove through it, Lady Danvers,’ said George.

‘Oh! the carriage drive is nothing,’ replied Lady Danvers, ‘but there is one avenue truly magnificent. They say the oaks in it are four hundred years old. Fancy, how delightful to live four hundred years!’

‘It might be if you lived at Danvers Park,’ said Sir Ralph Woodland, but not in his usual clear, firm tones.

‘Well, I don’t know, would we, even if we could,’ answered Lady Danvers, and a thoughtful expression passed over her fine face. ‘We will live, you know—I believe this, don’t you, Mrs Gifford?—in another life?’

‘I trust so,’ replied Laura, in a low, faltering voice, and as she spoke Sir

Ralph again looked at her face, and so did George Gifford.

‘Are you tired, Laura?’ asked George kindly.

‘I am a little, I think, George,’ said Laura, who in truth felt a strange faintness creeping over her.

‘Oh! how stupid of me!’ cried Lady Danvers, starting to her feet, ‘keeping you talking instead of giving you some tea or some wine. Why, you look quite pale, Mrs Gifford?’

‘It is nothing,’ said Laura, still in that strange faltering voice. ‘I will have some tea, please.’

George handed her some tea which was standing ready on a table near, but Laura’s hand shook so she could not hold the cup.

‘You are actually trembling; Sir

Ralph, please hand that small table here,' said Lady Danvers very kindly. 'There, put your cup on that, but take my advice and have some wine after your journey?'

'I will get you some,' said Sir Ralph, who all the while had been standing looking at Laura's pale face. On another table stood wine and liqueurs, as Sir Richard never took tea when he came in from shooting. Sir Ralph poured out a glass of wine and carried it to Laura, putting it down on the table which he had placed near her.

'Take it, my dear,' said George Gifford, a little anxiously, raising the glass and holding it to Laura's lips.

She looked at him and smiled faintly, and then sipped a little of the wine.

‘I am all right, George,’ she said; ‘only a little tired.’

‘Well, as soon as you have taken the wine, I suggest you go and lie down a little while before dinner,’ proposed Lady Danvers. ‘It is only six now,’ she added, glancing at the watch on her wrist, ‘and we do not dine until eight, so you have lots of time to get a nice rest.’

‘That is a very good plan, Lady Danvers,’ said George. ‘Drink the wine, my dear, and then if you will excuse us, Lady Danvers?’

‘Of course, Mr Gifford. Ring the bell, dear Dicky, and I will order Mrs Lawson, my housekeeper, to look after you, and show you your rooms.’

She did this, and George offered his arm to Laura, who took it, and then

with faltering footsteps left the room.

‘Who is the lady?’ asked Sir Ralph Woodland, after she was gone.

‘Oh! such a charming young woman and a bride,’ replied Lady Danvers. ‘She is called Mrs Gifford, and that is her husband. Her father was an army man, and they used to live in the little country town where my mother lives. That is how I know her; then Major Ingram died, and his daughter, who is a very clever girl, went up to town to try to make her fortune by writing books. But it ended in her marrying Mr Gifford, who had been her father’s lawyer.’

‘She—is handsome,’ said Sir Ralph, slowly.

‘Very handsome, I think; it is such

an intellectual face ; I admire her greatly, and I fancy—I don't know, but still I fancy—that she did not marry Mr Gifford for love, and that always seems rather sad to me.'

'It is always sad. But why do you think this?'

'Because she is so different to him. You see, he is a well-to-do lawyer, and she, poor girl, I suppose, had nothing or next to nothing. And it takes years, I am told, before you can make a really decent income by literature. So what could she do but marry for money?'

Sir Ralph was silent ; he was remembering a certain interview in which Laura Ingram had refused a very much better offer of marriage than that of a rich lawyer.

‘And,’ he said, hesitatingly, a few moments later, ‘in the town where your mother lives—was she considered—to be a nice girl.’

‘Very nice, but a little bit proud and cold, my mother said, to most people. It is said also, I believe, that Mr Gifford offered to her before she left Suffolk. But she was away more than a year when she returned as his wife.’

Sir Ralph asked no more questions. He went out to walk in the park in the gathering gloom, with bent head and knitted brows. He understood now he had been deceived regarding Laura’s character; that the whole story of her leaving Maddox Street with a gentleman was probably a false one.

‘It was that little devil Patty May told me this,’ he thought bitterly, ‘Fool! fool that I was to believe a false tongue like hers!’

CHAPTER VI.

OLD MEMORIES.

LAURA still looked very pale when she appeared in the drawing-room before dinner, but handsome and composed. She was dressed in white, and wore the diamonds that George had given her, and Sir Ralph Woodland's eyes followed her as she moved across the room.

Lady Danvers went forward to meet her, and asked her if she were rested now, and then turned round and beckoned

to Sir Richard to approach them, who was standing talking to a small group of men by the fireplace.

‘Let me introduce you to my husband,’ she said, as the jovial, somewhat red-faced baronet approached them. ‘Richard, this is Mrs Gifford, of whom you have heard me speak.’

‘Very pleased to see Mrs Gifford,’ he said, holding out his kindly hand. He was a man who admired handsome women, and, indeed, all the good things of this world. He enjoyed his life, and having his friends around him to share his pleasures. He was fond, too, and proud of his wife, and was a good husband, a good landlord, and a warm-hearted, generous-minded man.

‘My little Lu,’ he went on, smil-

ingly looking at his wife, and then a Laura, 'talked of no one else but you, I assure you, after she came back from Suffold. I was afraid you would be too clever for me, as Lucinda has all the brains of the family.'

'He wishes me to contradict him, Mrs Gifford,' said Lady Danvers, smiling also, 'but I won't, to punish him.'

'Well, 'pon, my honour, I can't understand how anyone writes a book all out of their own head! It amazes me; and I own I feel a sort of awe of anyone who can.'

'I hope you will not feel any awe of me, Sir Richard,' said Laura pleasantly.

'You don't look a bit as if you

could write one,' answered Sir Richard in genuine good faith; 'you look too charming.'

Both Lady Danvers and Laura laughed at this, and then Lady Danvers looked back, and, meeting Sir Ralph Woodland's grave eyes, she slightly waved with her fan for him to approach them.

'Do you hear this heresy?' she said. 'Sir Richard declares that Mrs Gifford looks too charming to write books.'

A sudden flush passed over both Laura's face and Sir Ralph's as they listened to these words, and for a moment their eyes met.

'Now, don't you agree with me, Woodland?' went on Sir Richard, with his jolly laugh. 'A handsome woman

shouldn't spoil her eyes and her complexion with poring over pen and ink all day? No, no, Mrs Gifford, leave that kind of work to your plainer sisters, it's something for them to do, poor things!' And again he gave a hearty laugh.

'Well, I admire clever women,' said Sir Ralph.

'And not handsome ones, eh, Woodland?' answered the baronet. 'Ah, my dear boy, you may tell us that, but you won't get us to believe it.'

'That is hard,' replied Sir Ralph, with a sarcastic little bow.

'Why not a clever, handsome woman?' said Lady Danvers, gaily. 'Surely two good qualities are better than one.'

'You are perfectly right, Lady Danvers; a clever, handsome woman

shall be my future type of perfection.'

'Are you sarcastic, Sir Ralph?' inquired Lady Danvers, archly.

'I don't know,' he answered.

But just at this moment dinner was announced, and Sir Richard offered his arm to Laura, and the little group parted.

At dinner Laura sat at one end of the table and Sir Ralph Woodland at the other. Once Laura ventured to look at him, and found his eyes were fixed on her face. She dropped her own eyes hastily, and was conscious that she blushed deeply. After this she devoted herself to Sir Richard, and luckily found a topic, which had unending interest to his ears. This was his little son, and

Sir Richard's whole countenance beamed at the very mention of Dicky's name.

'He's the finest little chappie,' he said, with immense pride; 'the pluckiest little dare-devil I ever came across. You should see him ride his pony; you must see him; I declare it's a treat.'

'And he's such a handsome child, too,' said Laura, judiciously.

'Yes, there's nothing to find fault with in his looks; he's his mother's image. Did you notice his nose was the very same pattern as hers?'

'But he has blue eyes like yours.'

'So I try to flatter myself, and his mother tries to flatter me, only mine are a bit the worse for wear. But it's not the looks of the boy I prize

most, it's his spirit, his pluck. He's a splendid little beggar!'

And in this artless fashion Sir Richard continued to talk of Dicky nearly the whole dinner time. He never thought he was wearying Laura, because to him the theme was unwearying. He was not a clever man, but Lady Danvers, with unerring tact, never let him preceive this. She owed him so much, that she did everything to make his life happy and content.

There were no ladies present but Laura and the hostess, so these two had, what Lady Danvers called 'a delightful chat' in the drawing-room before the men joined them. Somehow Laura found herself telling Lady Danvers of her struggles and disappointments, for this charming woman

had such a sympathetic heart that people half unconsciously confided in her.

‘But all this is over now, and you have a good husband to look after you, and take care of you,’ said Lady Danvers.

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, and then she sighed ever so softly, but Lady Danvers heard it.

‘Do you think Sir Ralph Woodland good-looking?’ she asked the next minute.

‘He—seemed so,’ said Laura, with a faltering tongue.

‘I admire him,’ went on Lady Davers ; ‘it’s such a strong face. I should imagine him getting an immense power over anyone if he choose to exert his will. I wonder if he has ever been

in love. But I suppose not, as I do not think any woman would refuse him.'

Laura's lips quivered.

'There might be circumstances that—might compel it,' she said.

'Compel anyone to refuse him! Well, if he had the misfortune to fall in love with a married woman of course, otherwise I don't believe any girl would say him nay. You see, he's rich for one thing, in a good position, and, I think, decidedly good-looking.'

'Yes,' said Laura absently.

She was thinking of him standing before her in the little back room of a London street, pleading his love. She was thinking of him sitting by her side in the picture gallery, and how her heart seemed to understand his, and then she

remembered his sudden estrangement, his long absence, and his cold acknowledgment of her presence, when at last they did meet after his return.

But her thoughts were interrupted by his entrance into the room. He walked forward—a man of tall commanding bearing—and came up to where she and Lady Danvers were seated, and addressed Lady Danvers, making some inquiry after a mutual friend.

Lady Danvers answered him, and then, when her husband and the other gentlemen entered the room, she went towards them, and for the first time Laura and Sir Ralph were virtually alone.

He drew a chair and sat down in front of her, fixing his dark eyes on her changing face.

‘This is a strange meeting,’ he said in a low, concentrated tone.

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, almost below her breath.

‘I understood from your manner this afternoon that you did not choose to acknowledge our previous acquaintance? Is this so?’ asked Sir Ralph.

‘I see no good in doing so,’ replied Laura, with faltering lips.

‘I bow to your decision; though I regret it.’

‘It is all past and gone; best to forget it.’

‘That I shall never do.’

‘And yet—’ began Laura, looking up in his face, and then she paused.

But with that swift current of thought which there was naturally between them,

Sir Ralph instantly understood to what she alluded.

‘You mean our last meeting? When I passed you in the Park?’

‘Yes,’ and a burning blush flooded Laura’s face. She was recalling the brief joy and the bitter disappointment of that moment, recalling how she had turned away, feeling as though all brightness for her in life was ended.

‘I acted under a misapprehension. A shameful lie had been told me,’ said Sir Ralph in a low tone.

‘A lie?’ repeated Laura, looking in his face.

‘Yes! I will explain; but not here—’

‘Woodland,’ called Sir Richard’s voice at this moment, ‘we are going to play baccarat, come and join.’

Sir Ralph looked at Laura and hesitated.

‘Perhaps I had better go,’ he said.

‘Yes, do go,’ she answered.

Sir Richard and the other men were in the small inner drawing-room, and were standing round the table where they were going to play, and Lady Danvers was among them. But when Sir Ralph Woodland rose, she came into the large drawing-room where Laura was sitting, and approached her.

‘You come, too, Mrs Gifford,’ she said ;
‘it is amusing to watch them.’

So Lady Danvers, Laura and Sir Ralph went up to the baccarat table ; but when Sir Ralph saw they could make up the required number without him, he declined to join the game.

‘I don’t feel quite up to it to-night,’

he said. 'Suppose, Lady Danvers, that we take Mrs Gifford for a quiet half hour among the pictures? I know she is a great lover of art.'

For a moment Lady Danvers looked slightly surprised, she, of course, thinking Laura and Sir Ralph such recent acquaintances that he was very unlikely to know her tastes. But the next she good-naturedly assented.

'We think a great deal of our pictures,' she said, smiling. 'I think nearly all the great masters are represented at Danvers. Do you paint, Mrs Gifford?'

'I do a little,' answered Laura, but Sir Ralph, who by this time remembered that their former acquaintance was not to be spoken of, did not speak.

So they took Laura from room to

room of the great mansion, whose walls were enriched by the works of deathless names. Here was a Rembrandt, there a Gerard Dow, a Vandyke, a Rubens. Vast sums of money had been spent on the pictures at Danvers Park, and they had been bequeathed from sire to son, until a splendid collection had been formed. The present Sir Richard cared nothing about them, except the pride of possession. Lady Danvers was also proud of them, and they were hung in nearly all the reception rooms, and on the staircase, and along the corridors. Going along one of the softly lighted corridors, Laura stopped to look at a portrait of Nell Gwyn by Sir Peter Lely; the face of the fair and frail one being peculiarly attractive.

‘Her character is written on her face,’ said Sir Ralph, somewhat contemptuously.

‘Are all our characters, Sir Ralph?’ asked Laura.

‘Yes, though there are some fair masks of vice,’ he answered.

‘We all, I believe, wear masks occasionally,’ said Lady Danvers.

But at this moment a child’s plaintive cry fell on her ears, and Lady Danvers stopped to listen.

‘That is Dicky crying!’ she exclaimed; ‘his rooms are along this corridor; excuse me for a few minutes, Mrs Gifford?’

The next moment she had left them, and went hurrying along the corridor towards her little boy’s room, and a short embarrassed silence fell on the

two she left behind, which was broken by Sir Ralph Woodland.

‘Did you ever finish that picture of the Newfoundland that you began in the National Gallery?’ he asked abruptly.

‘Yes, I finished it; I have it at home now,’ she answered. ‘I tried to sell it, but I could not—seeing all these pictures reminds one—’

‘Of those days? Yes, with the bloom off the rose,’ said Sir Ralph moodily.

Laura did not answer. There was a strange subtle pleasure in her heart as she stood there with this dark-browed man by her side, beneath the picture of the dead beauty. The weariness that had fallen on her spirit during the long months that she had

been parted from him seemed suddenly to have passed away. Life was once more worth living for, and not merely the dull monotony of duty that she had lately passed through. Her oval cheeks flushed and her dark eyes shone, and Sir Ralph, watching her, thought her handsomer than ever.

‘And your book,’ he said, ‘what did it do?’

‘At first nothing,’ answered Laura, with a sort of vague smile flitting over her finely-formed lips; ‘it was published on the half-profit system, and there were no profits the publishers said, and I had given almost my last penny to assist at the expenses of the publication. It quite broke me down, I—I lost all hope—’

‘And then?’ asked Sir Ralph, still

with his eyes fixed on her expressive face.

‘Then—things changed,’ said Laura, with a sudden blush.

She was remembering how, on the morning of her marriage, things had changed. Thinking if that change had come before she might not now have been George Gifford’s wife.

‘And Valentine Ross, did you ever see anything more of him?’ inquired Sir Ralph.

‘That reminds me, Sir Ralph, of something I have always wished to tell you. I went to see Mr Ross, and when I thanked him for paying me so promptly he laughed, and advised me always to be paid through you. In fact, he gave me to understand that you had

paid me for the story, not himself?
Is this so?’

‘The idiot!’ said Sir Ralph grimly.
‘What made him talk such
folly?’

‘Then this was not so? I should
like to know?’

‘I thought Ross was not quite such
a fool,’ replied Sir Ralph, impatiently,
‘as to talk such bosh. Are
you writing any more stories
now?’

Laura shook her head.

‘Nor painting?’

‘No; I do nothing now. It is all
so different. I seem to have lost in-
terest—in these things.’

But Sir Ralph understood she had
lost interest in most things; that some-
how the spring of her life was broken,

and that all her bright hopes had passed away.

‘I have an explanation to make to you,’ he said, with suppressed agitation; ‘a long explanation. Shall I make it now?’

But before Laura could answer they both perceived Lady Danvers approaching them down the corridor.

‘Another time then?’ said Sir Ralph.

Laura bowed her head, and a moment later Lady Danvers had joined them.

‘I have kissed away my little darling’s tears,’ she said, smiling. ‘I hope I did not seem to keep you long?’

‘Oh, no,’ answered Laura hastily, and with a blush.

‘We have been talking of pictures—

and life,' said Sir Ralph. And Lady Danvers, as she glanced up at his dark face, wondered what made him look so strange.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE WOODS.

THE next day, after the men, as usual, had gone out to shoot, Lady Danvers proposed to drive Laura through some of the by-roads of the park in her pony carriage.

‘I want you really to see the place,’ she said; ‘the house is very well, but the trees are far better.’

It was one of those bright autumn days, when the faint, fresh chill in the air invigorates our frames

and raises our spirits. And, as Lady Danvers drove through the long arcades of foliage, Laura, looking upwards at the spreading branches, through which the sun was glinting, and dappling the fern brakes, thought that she had never seen anything so wild and picturesque as these woodland glades.

It was all so still and beautiful. No sound but a bird on the wing, or a hare scudding, scared, across the path. And the tints of the trees, the tawny orange, the mellow brown, and the blue mists lying over the dells, filled Laura's artistic soul with wistful delight.

'I shall carry it away in my brain,' she said. 'Oh, if my hand could only portray it!'

Lady Danvers was charmed with her enthusiasm.

‘I felt you would love it,’ she said. ‘When we were first married I was never weary of wandering in these woods.’

‘I cannot tell what they make me feel,’ answered Laura, ‘because words never, to my mind, express the deepest and tenderest of our thoughts. We do not talk of our love.’

Lady Danvers looked at her greatly interested.

‘You could love very deeply, Mrs Gifford?’ she said.

Laura’s only answer was a soft, low sigh.

‘It is a doubtful gift you know, I think,’ continued Lady Danvers

‘when one absorbing passion takes possession of our hearts. It may bring great misery ; its very intensity is pain.’

‘Yet it might bring happiness—great happiness.’

And again Laura sighed.

‘Yes, but I should be afraid to risk it. It is best to be content with small things, and to give moderately. I go on this principle, Mrs Gifford,’ added Lady Danvers, with a little laugh.

‘Ah, but you have everything,’ said Laura.

‘I have much, and I am thankful for it, and I try to make the best of my life, and do my best for those around me, but—there is always a “but,” you know.’

‘I think there can be none in your lot, Lady Danvers.’

‘Well, I do not mind confiding to you that I did not marry my first love. Dear as my husband is to me, most justly dear, there was someone who was once dearer still.’

‘And now?’ asked Laura eagerly.

‘He sleeps in an Indian grave. We had no money between us, and Walter Meredith went out to India to die.’

‘And it was a great blow to you?’

‘A great and bitter blow, yet, you see, I have got over it. I thought when I married that I had no heart to give to my husband, but I found I had, or something that does very well in its place.’

‘Still—’ began Laura wistfully.

‘I am happy and content,’ said Lady Danvers; ‘if I had married poor Walter I could have been no more.’

‘I wish I could feel thus.’

‘I am older than you, and perhaps colder. But, believe me, it is unwise to love too much.’

Lady Danvers spoke almost in a tone of warning. This clever woman had almost unconsciously sounded the depth of her companion’s heart.

‘She may wreck her life,’ she was thinking. ‘She does not love her husband, and she may learn to love someone else too well.’

With a sort of effort Laura tried to change the conversation.

‘We are talking quite sentimentally,’ she said.

‘Sense and sentiment; both very good things in their way,’ laughed Lady Danvers, ‘but both to be taken in moderation.’

‘This is not a spot to talk sense,’ smiled Laura.

‘It is certainly very lovely,’ said Lady Danvers, looking round at her fair surroundings. ‘But let us talk sense for a little while. Tell me of your new home. Of whom does it consist?’

‘Of my husband’s father, a dear, old man, and his niece, whom I cannot say I think dear.’

‘A middle-aged woman, I suppose?’

‘Yes, I should call Miss Lindsay middle-aged.’

‘And, therefore, jealous of a younger and handsomer woman? Age either improves the character or deteriorates it; as a rule it improves the large mind, and a small one grows worse. Is this lady large-minded?’

‘No; very small-minded, I should think.’

‘Then forgive me if I warn you to beware of her. Remember, gnats can sting.’

Laura laughed pleasantly.

‘I am not afraid of her,’ she said, ‘and George, my husband, does not care for her much either, but she is useful to old Mr Gifford, so we must try not to quarrel with her.’

‘Yes, of course. But I am afraid we must turn homewards. The vicar and his wife are coming to lunch to-

day, for they wish to see me about some alterations in the church; and my mother comes in the afternoon. I wish you to know her. I think, though she is so old, you will find her more companionable than most of the Suffolk people.'

'I am sure I shall like her.'

Then Lady Danvers turned the pony's head, and they went back through the winding tracks in the wood, just wide enough for a pony phaeton to advance along, carpeted with mossy turf, and overshadowed by the long branches of the birch, or the sweeping masses of oaken boughs. Laura felt in a state of suppressed excitement, and was wondering if Sir Ralph Woodland would return to the Park for lunch.

But no; none of the sportsmen did.

Lunch was sent to them, and the party at the Park consisted merely of the vicar of the parish, his wife, and Lady Danvers and Laura. The vicar was intent on his repairs, and his wife on her children. Lady Danvers sympathised with both, and Laura naturally felt very little interest in the conversation. When lunch was over, therefore, she asked Lady Danvers' leave to go out once more in the woods.

‘But I am afraid I cannot go with you,’ said Lady Danvers, ‘as my mother would be so disappointed not to find me at home waiting for her when she arrives. But one of the grooms will drive you.’

‘I prefer walking,’ answered Laura, smiling. ‘I wish to see if the won-

derful light and shade of the woodlands will inspire me.'

'Oh, yes! Go and weave a romance! I want the Danvers' woods to be immortalised,' said Lady Danvers gaily.

Thus Laura was free to go, and she went. Went along the mossy paths and the wooded glades. She walked on and on, scarcely noting the time, her heart full of vague and restless longings. At last she stopped beneath a mighty oak, spreading its gnarled branches to the sky. Its vast trunk was grey with clinging lichen; its foliage changing with the changing year, and yellowing in the sun.

She was still looking upwards, mentally measuring the great boughs that drooped to the very ground, and formed an ample tent, whose waving cur-

tains stirred with the passing breeze, when she heard a footstep approaching her, and, looking hastily round, she saw Sir Ralph Woodland's tall form carrying his gun, coming towards the very tree beneath which she stood.

He had not seen her; did not see her until he caught a glimpse of her grey gown below the shadowing boughs. Then he stopped, took off his cap, laid down his gun, and also went beneath the spreading oak.

'You startled me,' he said, trying to speak lightly, though his dark face flushed. 'I took you for one of the nymphs of the wood.'

'This is a fitting bower for one,' answered Laura, with a smile and a vivid blush.

'Yes. Are you alone?'

‘Quite alone. The vicar of the parish came to lunch, and I found myself rather in the way, and so set out for a walk in the woods by myself.’

‘I am glad that I have met you,’ said Sir Ralph, looking at her gravely.

Laura stirred uneasily, and her eyes fell.

‘I want to talk to you; to explain my conduct, which must have seemed inexplicable to you.’

‘Is it any use to speak of it now?’ said Laura, with faltering lips.

‘It is of use; to me, at least. You remember my telling you that I had received an anonymous letter warning me against you.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you remember that—this letter

did not prevent my doing what I had intended to do—that I asked you to be my wife.’

‘Yes,’ again half whispered Laura.

‘You answered that it could not be; that there was a reason why it could not be.’

‘I remember,’ said Laura, with a little gasping sigh, and her face grew very pale.

‘I felt greatly disappointed. I left you with a moody and uneasy heart. I asked myself why you should reject my love when there was, I knew, such a strong bond of sympathy and union between our minds. I knew that then; I know it now. What could be your reason? Then I remembered the anonymous letter in which your character was vilified, and I was actually

thinking of this when I accidentally met Miss Patty May.'

Laura lifted her dark eyes, and looked him quickly in the face.

'Well?' she said inquiringly.

'She told me an extraordinary thing had happened to her; that she also had received an anonymous letter against your character, warning her that you were not a proper person for her to know—forgive me speaking plainly, but I must know the truth.'

Laura's lips slightly curled.

'She probably wrote both the letters herself,' she said scornfully.

'I did not, I could not believe this of any woman at the time, now I have strong doubts on the subject; nay, I believe she did commit this shameful

action. However, I went to see her letter, and, as I turned into Maddox Street, I saw you enter the house with a gentleman.'

'It must have been Mr Gifford then, for I never spoke to anyone else.'

'Pardon me for asking you such a question, but were you engaged to Mr Gifford then?'

'Most certainly not. He had been my poor father's lawyer, and he was mine; he had arranged all about my affairs, and had acted in the kindest manner to me. I never spoke to another gentleman in London except yourself and two publishers. I knew no one. Miss Patty May maligned my character totally without reason.'

‘I am now only too sure of this. But consider and forgive my natural jealousy and anger. Another day I saw a gentleman hand you into a cab. Then I told myself you were no wife for me; that your reason for refusing me had probably been your love for another man.’

‘It was not!’ said Laura, and a sudden flush dyed her face from chin to brow.

‘I thank God for this,’ answered Sir Ralph, in a low, emphatic voice. ‘But,’ he added, ‘I believed this to have been your reason at the time, and I made up my mind to try and forget you. I went abroad, to Paris first, and lead an idle, careless life there; but I did not do what I meant to do. I could not forget you; and at last, after some

months, I decided to return to town and try to learn the truth more fully.'

'About me?'

'Yes ; about you. Well, I did return. I went the very next day to your rooms in Maddox Street. That little wretch, Patty May, must have seen me at the house door. The servant told me you had left some time ago, and Patty May came rushing down to meet me. I wanted to hear about you, and I went into her rooms for the purpose. I asked about you, and she put on a shocked air. She said there had been a great scandal about you ; that you had left Maddox Street some months ago, and that you had gone away with a young man.'

‘How shameful! How utterly shameful!’ cried Laura indignantly.

‘You may well say how shameful. But this news, this lie, was a bitter blow to me. Unconsciously I had cherished a hope that I might have been mistaken before. Now, what could I believe? A few days later I met you in the Park, and when you bowed and smiled I felt only anger and scorn.’

‘And you passed me without a word,’ said Laura, with a strange pathos in her voice. ‘Passed me at a time when a kind word from a friend would have been much to me. Now, let me tell you my story; tell you the reason I left Maddox Street, but not with a young man! I left it because I was too poor to stay; because

one disappointment after another had happened to me. I went to shabby lodgings in Edgware Road, and there, also, had nothing but trouble. I spent my last fifty pounds in trying to get my novel published. I was left without money. I could not pay my landlady, who was insolent to me—'

'Good heavens !' interrupted Sir Ralph, with passionate impatience, 'and all this time I was thinking of you, wearing my heart out for your sake !'

'And at last,' continued Laura, as though unmindful of his words, 'at last, when the landlady would, I am sure, have turned me homeless into the streets unless I had paid her by a certain day—I wrote to Mr Gifford. He had told me before I left Suffolk that if ever I needed a friend I had

to think of him. I wrote to ask him to lend me ten pounds—'

'And he came? I understand now,' said Sir Ralph, with suppressed bitterness.

'He came; he brought money; he was most generous. And after awhile—he asked me to be his wife—I was very friendless, and so I—'

Tears rushed into Laura's eyes as, in broken accents, she faltered out these last words, and she turned her head away to try to conceal them, but Sir Ralph caught her hand and bent down his head and kissed it.

'Will you—can you forgive me?' he said.

'There is nothing to forgive,' answered Laura, a little sob half choking her voice; 'you were deceived by Miss

May, and he — my husband — is very good to me.'

Sir Ralph did not speak. He stood there holding her hand, his heart full of emotions he dare not tell.

CHAPTER VIII.

A ROW.

‘I THINK I must go now,’ said Laura, a moment later, and she gently drew her hand away from Sir Ralph’s trembling grasp.

He did not ask her to stay. He put aside the drooping branches of the oak for her to pass from beneath it, and followed her, picking up his gun as he went.

‘May I walk with you to the Park?’ he asked, as he rejoined her.

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, and for some minutes not another word was exchanged between them. They walked side by side—these two who loved each other in silence—for what was there to say? Sir Ralph was inwardly cursing Patty May, whose treachery he believed had lost him the woman he loved. But Laura was not thinking of Patty May. She was thinking of her dead father’s letter, and the cruel legacy he had left to her young life.

‘Under any circumstances it could not have been,’ she was telling herself mournfully.

Twice Sir Ralph turned his head and looked at her before he spoke again. He saw her delicate profile, her drooped head, her quivering lips. Then, suddenly, there flashed across his mind

the remembrance of something she had said.

‘May I ask you one more question?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, without raising her head.

‘You told me a little while ago that it was not from any attachment to anyone else that made you refuse me? Will you tell me what was your reason?’

Laura was silent.

‘Was it that you did not care for me, that you were indifferent to me?’ urged Sir Ralph.

‘Oh, hush! hush, Sir Ralph!’ cried Laura, in great agitation.

‘I pray you to tell me the truth?’

‘I cannot,’ answered Laura, and she put her hand over her face. ‘But this

much I will tell you, I cared for no one else.'

'You were bound to no one else?'

'I was not; most certainly not. Mr Gifford had asked me to marry him before I left Suffold, and I had refused him. He was the only lover I ever had.'

'There was one exception, at least,' said Sir Ralph, with some bitterness.

'Oh, do not speak of it, Sir Ralph! There was a reason—a painful reason—but it had nothing to do with you nor me. I was forced to act as I did.'

'And but for this reason you might have loved me?' said Sir Ralph slowly.

Laura did not speak.

Laura, did you love me? My heart told me that you did.'

Then Laura looked at him, and there was reproach in her eyes.

'Is this generous?' she said.

'No, it is ungenerous,' he answered; 'I admit that—but even now—'

He said nothing more. A few minutes later he pointed to a winding woodland path which branched off from the one on which they were then walking.

'This is a wonderful place, isn't it?' he said, almost in his ordinary voice.

'It is very beautiful,' answered Laura, in faltering tones.

'Do you ever sketch from nature? Do you think you could sketch here?'

'I am afraid not.'

'We might try some day. Lady

Danvers sketches fairly well. I must ask her to get up a sketching party.'

No, no, I could not,' answered Laura.

She could not recover her composure as quickly as he had done; she was trembling. The very knowledge that he had always loved her, that his estrangement even had been part of his love—his jealous love—filled her heart with the deepest emotion. Sir Ralph evidently wished to talk of other things, but she could not.

'And these girls,' she said, 'Miss May—have you seen her lately?'

'I have had a letter from her,' answered Sir Ralph, with a little shrug of his shoulders. 'I know where to find her, and I shall call her strictly to account for the mischief she has done

‘That is only right—and yet—’

‘Do you not wish me to do this?’ asked Sir Ralph quickly.

‘I do wish it; but I was thinking—we met, you see, here, as strangers—perhaps more mischief might come of it!’

‘I understand what you mean; but it was such shameful conduct, and to allow her to go unpunished?’

‘Still—’ hesitated Laura.

‘I shall cut her at all events,’ said Sir Ralph grimly, ‘and she won’t like that.’

‘I suppose—she must like you?’

‘She wishes to marry me, I believe,’ answered Sir Ralph scornfully, and with a contemptuous shrug.

But by this time they had neared the house, and Sir Ralph did not offer to accompany Laura any further.

‘I will go round by the gun-room, he said. ‘But we will meet at dinner; and—and—I shall never forget what I have heard to-day.’

Laura made no reply to this. She knew also that she would never forget what she had heard that day; but she knew also that she must make no sign. She made haste, therefore, to go into the small drawing-room, where she found quite a large party drinking tea and otherwise refreshing themselves. Some of the sportsmen had come in, and among them was George Gifford.

‘Why, Laura,’ he said, going up to her, as she entered the room, ‘I’ve been wondering what had become of you? Lady Danvers said you had gone out to walk in the wood, and I was just going to start out to seek you.’

‘I have had quite a long walk,’ answered Laura, ‘the woods are so beautiful.’

‘Yes, aren’t they jolly ; we must go for a walk in them some day.’

‘Yes.’

‘But, Laura, I’ve had a letter from my father by this afternoon’s post, and I find that I shall be obliged to go back to Suffolk to-morrow on some important business. But I could leave you here and return for you on Friday, if you would like that? Lady Danvers asked you, you know.’

Laura was silent for a moment or two, and then she said slowly,—

‘No, I think not, George I think I should rather go back with you.’

‘Well, just as you like, my dear. Of course I shall be very pleased if

you will go back with me, only I did not like to shorten a pleasant visit for you.

‘I think I will go with you,’ answered Laura, with a wistful look in her dark eyes. She was thinking ‘I am better away; better out of his sight;’ but George Gifford could not read her thoughts, and was pleased that his young wife was ready to give up a pleasant visit for his sake. He went and brought her some tea, and he was still standing beside her when Sir Ralph Woodland entered the room, and at once approached the husband and wife.

But he said nothing about his meeting with Laura in the woods. He asked George Gifford about the day’s shooting, and the extent of the

bag. He spoke, in fact, more to George than to Laura, and presently Laura left them, and went to talk to Lady Danvers and tell her that she proposed to return the next day to Suffolk.

But Lady Danvers would not hear of this.

‘No,’ she said, in her pretty way, ‘I will not allow Mr Gifford to take you away. I want you to get “copy”—is that the word?—for your next new novel in the Danvers’ woods. Mr Gifford, come here!’ and she beckoned to George, who crossed the room to speak to his hostess.

‘Mr Gifford, here is this charming wife of yours telling me that you are beginning to act the tyrant lord and master already! That because

you have to go away to-morrow on business for a short time that she has to go away too! I really won't have it!'

George laughed.

'It was Laura's own proposal, Lady Danvers, not mine,' he said.

'Well, you see, George, I thought—' began Laura, with a blush.

'You must not think of it any more, then, Mrs Gifford; your husband will come back for you. Why, you've seen nothing of my mother, nothing of Sir Richard, nothing of me!'

'You are very kind, Lady Danvers, but—'

'I will listen to no "buts." Let us settle it for her, Mr Gifford. When do you propose to return?'

‘On Friday,’ answered George, good-naturedly. ‘You had better stay, Laura, until then.’

They settled it thus. George was to leave for Suffolk the next day, Thursday, and to return to the Park on Friday, and their visit was to terminate on Saturday.

Laura could scarcely help assenting to this arrangement without rudeness to Lady Danvers, whom she liked so much. She therefore gave way, and glanced half timidly across the room to where Sir Ralph was standing as she did so. He was talking to some men, and he went on talking to them; and after dinner it was the same thing.

He, in fact, made no attempt to speak to her again during the rest

of the evening. But Laura noticed that he talked a good deal to George, and George was evidently pleased by this.

‘That’s a very nice fellow that Sir Ralph Woodland,’ he said to Laura afterwards; ‘he’s got plenty of common sense.’

‘He talks very well,’ answered Laura.

‘Yes; and they say he has a large fortune, so I suppose he’ll be getting married to some girl soon.’

And these careless words gave a fresh pang to Laura’s heart. What if he were to get married soon? Would it be better, be happier for them both? Laura knew that it would be, and yet she shrank from the thought as a patient shrinks from

the knife. She might keep out of his way, but she did not care to think that another woman should come between them.

She did not see him again until after George was gone. George left early, and there were some fresh arrivals expected during the morning at the Park; Sir Richard and Lady Danvers entertaining during the autumn a continual succession of guests. So Laura sat with her hostess and her venerable mother during the morning in Lady Danvers' boudoir, which is one of the prettiest rooms in the house, with a bay - window looking towards the west. Mrs Lynton, white-haired, aged, and dignified, did not say much. But the other two women touched on most of the subjects of the day; chiefly on

those vague yearnings which induce many to seek to pierce the veil which wraps the hidden things from our ken.

‘It is all such a mystery—such a mystery!’ said Laura, rising in some excitement, and going to the bay-window which overlooked part of the terrace. ‘We are born, and we cannot help ourselves; we die, and we cannot help ourselves; and in life, it seems to me, that we cannot help ourselves either.’

‘My dear,’ said Mrs Lynton’s gentle voice, ‘in one way we can help ourselves; we can lay all our troubles at the feet of our Heavenly Father, and ask His aid to help us to bear them.’

‘But why have we troubles?’ asked Laura.

‘I believe to prepare us for the untroubled land hereafter,’ answered the white-haired lady, whose own lot had not always been a smooth one. “Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well.” But it is easier for the old to feel this than the young.’

Laura made no answer. On the terrace below at this moment appeared the tall, grey-clad figure of a man, whom Laura instantly recognised. Recognised with a sudden tumultuous throbbing at her heart, and a deep flush on her oval cheeks. It was Sir Ralph Woodland, and he found the ladies in the small dining-room when the luncheon hour came.

‘Then you are not with the rest, Sir Ralph?’ said Lady Danvers, smiling when she saw him.

‘No, I have been in the house all the morning, except for half-an-hour’s smoke on the terrace. I have been writing business letters and returning a love letter,’ answered Sir Ralph, and he looked at Laura as he spoke.

‘Returning a love letter!’ repeated Lady Danvers, with a laugh. ‘What an extraordinary proceeding!’

‘Quite a necessary one, I assure you,’ said Sir Ralph.

‘And the poor girl? Are you breaking anyone’s heart, Sir Ralph?’

‘No, I am quite sure I am not; the young lady in this case has no heart to break.’

Lady Danvers laughed and turned away to receive some fresh visitors who had just arrived at the Park—a Colonel and Mrs Vanhurst. The Colonel was

a fine grey-haired old soldier, and his wife a pretty little woman who easily went into ecstasies. She went into ecstasies now on the beauties of Danvers Park and its surroundings, and occupied Lady Danvers' attention. Then Sir Ralph crossed over to where Laura was standing.

'You know to whom I returned my love letter?' he said, smiling.

Laura also smiled.

'You will only get a more tender appeal in return, and a demand for an explanation,' she answered.

'Which I shall also return; I shall never speak another word to her.'

'I think it would be the wisest plan,' said Laura, lowering her voice.

'What are you going to do this afternoon?' then asked Sir Ralph.

‘What the others do, I suppose,’ said Laura.

‘Probably that gushing little woman yonder will want to see over the grounds. Would you like a row on the lake?’

‘We must leave Lady Danvers to decide how her guests shall amuse themselves.’

When luncheon was over Mrs Vanhurst entreated them to go over the place, ‘and explore the lovely woods!’ she cried, clapping her little hands together in her well-feigned enthusiasm.

‘We will all go then,’ said Lady Danvers. ‘Mrs Vanhurst, allow me to present Sir Ralph Woodland to you.’

‘And will you be my guide through the woods?’ said the pretty little woman,

raising her fine eyes to Sir Ralph's face with a look of pathetic appeal and innocence.

'I should have been charmed,' he answered grimly, 'only I have already promised to row another lady on the lake.'

And he looked at Laura as he spoke, who turned her head away, and affected not to hear what he had said.

'And can I not row too?' asked Mrs Vanhurst sweetly, who did not wish to lose the company of the most distinguished-looking man in the room.

'The woods are well worth seeing,' answered Sir Ralph, turning away. 'Do not forsake me in my trouble,' the next moment he half whispered in Laura's ear. 'You promised, remember, to row with me on the lake.'

Laura could not help smiling, but Sir Ralph got his own way.

‘I am going to row Mrs Gifford,’ he said calmly, when Lady Danvers approached them, and little Mrs Vanhurst was forced to start to explore the woods in the—to her—wearisome company of her husband and Lady Danvers, for she was tired of her husband, and always tired of all women.

In the meanwhile the two who were going down to the lake were smiling over her discomfiture.

‘You behaved very badly to that little lady, Sir Ralph,’ said Laura.

‘I hate gushing women,’ he answered. ‘It was awfully good of you to come to my rescue.’

‘You gave me no choice.’

‘I wished you to come so much.’

They did not say much after this. They walked together over the smooth, green sward, down to the shining lake, by whose margin the tall reeds reared their graceful heads. There was a small island in the centre of the lake, and this was inhabited by a great quantity of water-fowl. A peaceful scene, silent, beautiful, and well suited to the mood of the two, who stood looking at the blue depth of the sun-lit water, round which the willows drooped, and the breeze softly stole.

There were two boats moored to the shore, and one of these Sir Ralph presently drew in, and, having assisted Laura into the boat, pushed off, and began to row across the lake. The rhythmic dip of the oars, the romantic beauty of the scene, seemed to cast a sort of spell

over Laura's soul. The last few months seemed to pass away from her mind. She was a girl again, listening once more to her lover's voice. Yet no word of love came from Sir Ralph's firm lips. He knew if he had spoken such he would have frightened her; that he would have destroyed the charm of that tacit agreement that bound their hearts.

But it was a perilous hour to both. Deepening the strong passion in the man's heart, and filling the woman's whole being with a vague sense of happiness she had never felt before. And not until the sun began to dip in the west, and a chill breeze crept over the darkening water, did Laura recall herself from that blissful trance.

'It must be getting late,' she said.
'You had better row in, Sir Ralph.'

‘So soon?’ he answered.

Ah, it was too soon for him. Too soon for her. Time had rushed on in that golden hour as it flies to cheat us of our joy. Yet he did not disobey her wish, nor attempt to detain her. He rowed slowly back to the landing place. He assisted Laura from the boat, and then both, as if by mutual consent, turned round to look at the now shadowed lake.

‘I shall never forget it,’ said Sir Ralph, in a low tone.

‘I shall see it in my dreams,’ thought Laura; but a moment later she roused herself.

‘Come, Sir Ralph, let us make haste; they will think we are lost,’ she said.

And so the two turned and went away.

CHAPTER IX.

A VISITOR.

THEY walked quickly back to the house, and did not encounter any of the other guests on their way there, and when Laura reached her own room she felt glad that they had not done so.

Yet she had done nothing wrong, she told herself. It was all so beautiful, she added, and then, with a sigh, she commenced to dress for dinner, unfastening her long, brown hair, which

was remarkable for its beauty and thickness.

What made her look at herself so earnestly in the mirror as she did so? Was she pleased at the new beauty in her face, at the glow on her oval cheeks? She was not a vain woman, but what woman is there who would not look fair to some eyes? It might be wrong, but she chose to wear her prettiest gown, though she did not clasp the diamonds George had given her round her slender throat.

She looked like a beautiful girl when she went into the small drawing-room where the guests were assembled before dinner. She was dressed in white, with some crimson roses that Lady Danvers had asked

one of the gardeners to cut for her in the morning in her hair and at her breast.

Sir Ralph Woodland was leaning against one of the walls of the room as she went in, and his eyes scarcely left her face after she entered. Never had he seen her so beautiful, he thought. The richness and glow of her colouring was so different to when he had met her in town. He recalled at this moment the young artist he had first admired sitting at her work; the grave girl who had raised her dark eyes to his with such proud indifference.

Ah, there was no indifference in them now. Presently their eyes met, and something in that shadowed glance, for her eyelids quickly fell, made Sir

Ralph cross the room and approach her side.

‘You are not tired, I hope?’ he said. ‘But I see you are not,’ he added, and he smiled.

‘No, I am not tired,’ answered Laura, softly.

At this moment, however, pretty little Mrs Vanhurst also drew near. She had found the walk in the woods very tiresome, and she did not see why ‘that Mrs Gifford’ should have Sir Ralph Woodland all to herself.

‘Had you a charming row on the lake?’ she said, addressing Sir Ralph. ‘Ah, I quite envied you.’

‘It was very nice down there this afternoon.’ replied Sir Ralph, in an indifferent tone.

‘I love the water,’ continued Mrs

Vanhurst. 'If the morning is fine, will you give me a row, too, Sir Ralph?'

'Too proud,' he answered, with a slightly sarcastic ring in his voice; but Mrs Vanhurst was by no means thinned.

And, to Sir Ralph's great annoyance, he was presently requested to take her in to dinner, while her husband, Colonel Vanhurst, escorted Laura.

Mrs Vanhurst was one of those little women who try to make every man they meet in love with them. But it was simply her vanity she wished to gratify. She therefore did her very best during dinner to make Sir Ralph first in love with himself and then with her.

She flattered him; she looked at him

with her fine eyes, and played with them unceasingly.

She admired Sir Ralph ; admired his dark, distinguished face, in which lingered, she afterwards declared, ‘one tinge of sadness, one touch of scorn.’

‘You look like a hero,’ she told him. ‘Have you ever done anything heroic? I believe you have.’

‘Never,’ truthfully affirmed Sir Ralph.

‘Ah, come now. When you have been out after big game in India or Africa, have you not saved some comrade’s life by your bravery? I feel sure you have?’

‘My biggest game has been the red rover of the furrows,’ laughed Sir Ralph.

‘I could fancy you a great sportsman, you look so brave, so strong. I love

courage in men, you know, though I am such a frightful little coward myself.'

'Pray, say a charming little coward.'

'You know what I mean! How naughty of you to laugh at me. But you must not be naughty any more, as I feel sure we shall be friends. I know by instinct those I shall like, do you?'

'And how do you know those you shall like?' parried Sir Ralph.

'By their faces—by their eyes; I read their souls.'

'I hope not,' devoutly said Sir Ralph.

'Ah, what a naughty, naughty man you are! I shall have to scold you and keep you in order. How long are you going to stay here?'

‘I am not quite sure.’

‘We are asked for three days. I do hope you will stay all the time I am here, and then I shall see something more of you.’

‘What, when I am so naughty?’

‘Well, you know, I rather like naughty men, to tell the truth.’ Here the fine eyes made tremendous play. ‘Not too naughty, you know?’

‘I am afraid you will find me too naughty.’

‘I will take the risk.’

Sir Ralph gave a grim little laugh. This pretty woman did not even amuse him—she bored him, and he was watching Laura across the table all the time she was chattering folly into his ears.

‘Do you admire that Mrs Gifford, the lady you rowed so long with this

afternoon?' now inquired Mrs Van-hurst.

'She is good-looking,' he answered coldly.

'They say she is a bride, and that her husband is a country lawyer, or something of that sort. I wonder at Lady Danvers having her here.'

'I believe Lady Danvers admires her extremely.'

'Indeed! And does Sir Ralph Woodland admire her extremely?'

'I certainly admire her,' answered Sir Ralph repressively.

'Then I do not. I own I do not. There is something about her—I do not know what it is—perhaps her class, that seems to me underbred!'

Sir Ralph made no reply to this. He looked across the table at the hand-

some, clever face, so full of life and beauty, and he heartily wished the flattering little woman by his side was anywhere but where she was. And she irritated him so greatly that when the ladies left the table, Mrs Vanhurst giving him a parting smile and glance, he determined that he would not exchange another word with her during the evening.

But Mrs Vanhurst was an old campaigner, and stationed herself on her return to the small drawing-room on a charming couch, just opposite the door of the room that she concluded the gentlemen would enter by. Presently her husband and Sir Ralph did enter by it, but when she looked up smilingly, she found Sir Ralph's head was high in the air, and his eyes fixed over her

own pretty head, and he strode past her couch with a very determined air indeed.

There was nothing left, therefore, for Mrs Vanhurst but to smile on her husband, which she did with a very bad grace. And when she looked round after Sir Ralph she found he was standing talking to Mrs Gifford.

‘It is disgusting the way that woman goes on,’ she thought. She grew restless. She rose from the side of her grey-haired husband, and crossed the room in the direction of Laura and Sir Ralph. But as she did so Sir Ralph offered his arm to Laura, and the two proceeded towards the large conservatory at one end of the room, and disappeared from Mrs Vanhurst’s view among the palms and orange trees.

‘I am positively afraid of that woman,’ Sir Ralph was saying.

‘It is very ungrateful of you,’ smiled Laura.

‘She bored me so fearfully at dinner.’

‘I am sure she was looking at you most sweetly.’

‘It’s horrid a woman like that talking to you—when you want to think of something else. Will you sit down here?’

He pointed to a seat under a spreading palm as he spoke, but Laura hesitated.

‘Do, for once,’ he urged.

He had a strange influence on her; it was almost as if he willed her to do a thing that she could not resist his power. She sat down, she leaned back, and breathed the

fragrant air. There was a hum of voices in the distance from the drawing-room beyond, but they were alone in the conservatory. Laura sighed softly, and Sir Ralph turned round and looked in her face.

‘What is troubling you?’ he asked.

‘Nothing, only—’

‘Only what?’

‘I was thinking of my ordinary life—so different to the life here, and as I return to Suffolk to-morrow—’

‘You return to-morrow?’ asked Sir Ralph quickly.

‘Yes, Mr Gifford is coming for me to-morrow, and we return by an early train.’

Sir Ralph did not speak for a moment. He put out one of his

strong, sinewy hands nervously, and broke off a shining orange-tree leaf as if unconscious of what he was doing. Then suddenly he bent forward, and looked in Laura's face.

'Are you glad that you came here?' he asked, in a low tone. 'Glad that you know now how shamefully I was deceived?'

'Yes, I am glad to know,' answered Laura, and she moved her fan restlessly as she spoke.

'I cannot forgive myself for being such a fool, but I have paid a bitter price for it.'

'Best not to speak of it,' half whispered Laura.

'Only to think of it—that is hard, very hard.'

He rose as he said this, and go-

ing up to a beautiful white moss rose tree, he plucked a bud, and returned with it in his hand, and laid it on Laura's lap.

'Take that for the sake of old times,' he said.

She did not refuse ; her hand stole down to the rose, but at this moment Lady Danvers and Mrs Vanhurst entered the conservatory.

'Is that a flirtation?' asked Mrs Vanhurst of her hostess.

'No, certainly not,' answered Lady Danvers decidedly. 'That is a young married woman, Mrs Gifford ; she hardly knows Sir Ralph Woodland, they only met here a few days ago.'

Mrs Vanhurst shrugged her shoulders airily. She was not as a rule

spiteful to other women, but she was spiteful now because Sir Ralph Woodland had twice left her to the society of her husband for Laura's sake. Yet she disguised her feelings, and smiled as sweetly as ever when she approached the spot where Sir Ralph and Laura were. Laura covered the white rosebud under her fan as Lady Danvers and Mrs Vanhurst drew near, and Sir Ralph noted this little action before he turned to speak to Lady Danvers and compliment her on the beauty of her flowers.

They all returned to the drawing-room together, and during the rest of the evening Laura had no further conversation with Sir Ralph. He went to play billiards, and when she went

down to breakfast the next morning he was nowhere to be seen.

‘The gentlemen are all off to Lord Redver’s place early this morning,’ explained Lady Danvers, and Laura felt a chill, cold feeling at her heart that Sir Ralph had not stayed to bid her good-bye, when she had told him she was leaving the Park early in the day.

And during the morning George Gifford arrived, and immediately after luncheon the husband and wife started on their return to Suffolk. Lady Danvers was exceedingly kind in her manner to Laura, and pressed her soon to return to the Park. But all the same this clever woman had begun to feel that perhaps she had not done the wisest thing in taking Laura from her

home. She had noticed Sir Ralph Woodland's attentions, though she had not chosen to admit this to Mrs Vanhurst. And she knew also that Sir Ralph was a very different man to George Gifford, and without knowing anything of Sir Ralph's former acquaintance with Laura, she thought him a somewhat dangerous friend for the young wife.

But during their journey home together Laura tried hard not to let George see that she did not look forward with pleasure to her return. It seemed so dull and dreary this quiet country town after all the beauties and excitement of Danvers Park, and the strange meeting and explanation of Sir Ralph was naturally foremost in her mind. She could think of nothing else.

And when she once more found herself in Red House, and looked round at its sombre walls, the last few days seemed to have been a glimpse of another life.

Old Mr Gifford welcomed her back with kindness and pleasure ; Anna Lindsay with secret malice and all uncharitableness. She had ordered a very good dinner to show how much better a housekeeper she was than Laura, but Laura did not seem to have any appetite, and scarcely noticed all the delicacies she had prepared.

‘You are not eating much, Mrs George,’ she remarked, looking disapprovingly at Laura’s plate.

‘Oh! please do not call me Mrs George, Miss Lindsay,’ answered Laura, with a smile.

‘Oh! I did not know you did not like your husband’s name,’ said Anna Lindsay, with a little toss of her head.

‘It is not that, of course, but Mrs George sounds so—’

‘Well, of course,’ I’m not accustomed to the fine company and ways of Danvers Park,’ said Anna Lindsay, as Laura paused before the word ‘common’ had passed her lips.

George, who was thoroughly enjoying the good dinner that Anna had ordered, now looked up from his plate with a smile.

‘What nonsense, Anna,’ he said, good-naturedly. ‘Of course Laura is not Mrs George, but Mrs Gifford; if my poor mother had been alive it would have been different, but I think be-

tween near relations you might drop the Mrs and Miss altogether.'

'I have not been asked to do so, George,' replied Anna Lindsay, and Laura did not speak.

This vulgar woman irritated her more than usual; perhaps, as Anna had taunted her, it was so after the different atmosphere of Danvers Park.

And so the next two days passed drearily enough away. Mrs Brentwood called on Laura to ask all about 'dear Lady Danvers,' and her visit to Danvers Park. Mrs Masterman also called on the same errand. No little jealousy had indeed been created in the minds of the vicar's family by Lady Danvers' invitation to Laura.

'She never would have seen her but for us,' they said to each other,

and somehow they felt themselves injured. But still they wanted to hear all about it, and asked Laura many questions as to the number of the guests, and their names, to which Laura gave somewhat reserved replies.

‘She quite gives herself airs on the subject, I declare,’ Mrs Masterman said to her mother, and Mrs Brentwood almost agreed with her.

‘I wonder if she will be asked again?’ she speculated, and Laura sometimes wondered this too, and would sigh as she did so.

But the third day after her return to Suffold something happened which filled her heart half with dismay, half with joy. George, as usual, had gone down to his office soon after breakfast, and about two o’clock an especial

messenger brought up a letter from him to Laura, which was as follows:—

‘MY DEAR LAURA,—You will remember Sir Ralph Woodland, whom we met at Danvers Park? Well, I have had him at the office this morning about the purchase of the Harewood estate, which is four miles from Suffolk. Young Harewood came into the property only three years ago, but he has been making ducks and drakes of his fortune ever since. Finally, he has got quite fast, and wants to sell Harewood, which ought to bring a good figure. There’s a fine old hall, and it’s a splendid game country, and in the old man’s time was well kept up. However, Sir Ralph Woodland is after it, and I must try to make a bargain

with him. And as we met him at Lady Danvers, and he was very civil, I thought I could do no less than ask him to dinner to-day. So, dear, will you order a good dinner at seven o'clock (don't mind a little extra expense, and I think it would be as well to consult Anna Lindsay, as she is a good hand at *entrées*), and get a waiter. There's rather a good fellow at 'The George.' At all events, get someone, as I don't think your waiting-maid is quite up to her business.—And I remain, dear Laura, yours affectionately,

GEORGE GIFFORD.'

'P.S.—Sir Ralph promised to be at Red House seven sharp. I will be home in time to put out the wine.

'G.'

CHAPTER X.

HAREWOOD.

As Laura read this letter the most varying emotions passed through her heart, and she trembled with excitement. But she had no time to waste. She hurried to Anna Lindsay's room, who was dressing for her afternoon's walk, and rapped at the door.

‘Come in,’ called Anna, and Laura entered, carrying George's letter in her hand.

‘Miss Lindsay, I've had a note from

George,' she began, 'and he has asked—a gentleman that we met at Danvers Park to dinner to-day, and—he says he thinks I had better consult you about the dinner.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Anna Lindsay, who was tying her bonnet strings, and she turned round and looked at the agitated face of her cousin's wife.

'He wants everything to be very nice,' went on Laura, nervously; 'but perhaps you had better read his letter,' and she put George's letter into her hand.

Miss Lindsay read it, and an undoubted feeling of triumph swelled in her heart.

'Sir Ralph Woodland?' she said. 'Is he a baronet? Naturally George wants everything to be very nice. Well, we

must do our best—but perhaps you would prefer me not to interfere.’

‘Nay, I have come to ask your advice,’ replied Laura, with rather a forced smile.

It must be admitted that Anna Lindsay was a good housekeeper, and, no doubt, a better and more experienced one than Laura. In a few minutes she had dictated an excellent dinner, and the cook was sent for. Then Laura went out to buy flowers and fruit, whilst Anna proceeded to order the substantial part of the entertainment. They were both anxious that everything should go off well, and Anna was proud that George should have thought of her on an especial occasion.

‘He threw me over,’ she reflected, ‘but he’s had to come back to me; I

thought the dinner yesterday would disgust him, but young madam, I suppose, is above housekeeping after she has been at Danvers Park.'

But even she was forced to admit that Laura decorated the table and rooms with very good taste. And all the time Laura felt in a state of suppressed excitement that it was very difficult to hide. Her hands were trembling, and her cheeks were flushed; but when George came in he never noticed this, but hurried to the cellar to bring out some of his best wine.

By the time, however, that Sir Ralph arrived at Red House, all the family were ready to receive him. Laura, looking very handsome in her moss-green silk, held out a trembling hand in greeting, as the waiter from 'The

George' threw open the drawing-room door and announced 'Sir Ralph Woodland.'

'Are you not surprised to see me?' he asked, gravely.

'No,' answered Laura, with downcast eyes and fluttering breast; 'Mr Gifford told me he expected you.'

'It was very good of Mr Gifford to ask me to dine with him,' said Sir Ralph, turning to his host; and George, of course, expressed the pleasure it gave him to receive Sir Ralph, and then introduced him to his father and Miss Lindsay.

The dinner went off very well, and the guest did his best to make himself agreeable to everyone at the table. He talked to old Mr Gifford, and even to Anna Lindsay, and he said

only a few words in private to Laura during the whole evening. She was showing him some valuable old engravings, and as she turned one over he said in a low tone,—

‘Will you be angry if I become your neighbour?’

She made no reply to his question. George came up, and the conversation once more became general. They began talking of Harewood, and George rather enlarged on the picturesque beauty of the place.

‘I will go over it to-morrow,’ said Sir Ralph, ‘if it is convenient to you, Mr Gifford? And perhaps the ladies will go too,’ he added, looking smilingly, first at Laura and then at Anna Lindsay; ‘it will be a little excursion.’

Laura smiled also, but shook her head.

‘We should only be in the way,’ she said.

‘Not in the least, I assure you,’ replied Sir Ralph; ‘I think Mr Gifford and I have nearly settled the business part of the arrangement, and I only want to see about some repairs that may be necessary. Do come, Mrs Gifford?’

‘Yes, Laura, you had better go, and Anna too,’ said George, pleasantly.

‘It would be very nice,’ said Anna Lindsay, who liked the idea of being seen in the company of Sir Ralph Woodland.

‘Let us settle it, then, if Mrs Gifford will give her consent,’ answered Sir Ralph, looking at Laura.

‘Well if you all wish it,’ smiled Laura.

‘It’s not a long drive, and I’ll get a carriage,’ said George; ‘and you had better go with us also, Sir Ralph.’

‘I shall be very pleased to do so, Mr Gifford. What time will suit you and Mrs Gifford best?’

They finally settled that Sir Ralph was to come to Red House for lunch at half-past one o’clock, and that the carriage was to be ordered for half-past two—George promising to return from his office in time.

Shortly after this was arranged, Sir Ralph Woodland went away, and George and Anna Lindsay spoke warmly in his praise after he had gone.

‘He’s a fine-looking, gentlemanly man,’ said Anna.

‘He’s a nice fellow, and doesn’t put on any side, like some of these young swells do,’ quoth George.

But Laura said nothing. She turned away her head. She began rearranging the flowers in a vase, and Anna Lindsay wondered at her silence.

‘Did you see much of him at Danvers Park?’ she asked, addressing George.

‘A good deal; and he was very civil all the time,’ answered George. ‘He doesn’t seem much of a lady’s man, but I suppose his day will come, like it does to the most of us,’ he added, with a laugh; and still Anna noticed that Laura did not speak.

‘Perhaps he is thinking of buying

Harewood to bring his bride there,' she said.

'Oh, no; more as a kind of shooting-lodge, I think,' replied George. 'He has a fine place of his own in Yorkshire; but he's a great sportsman, it seems, and I think Harewood will just suit him.'

Then old Mr Gifford began talking of the late squire of Harewood, and lamenting over the follies of the present one, and the conversation drifted away from Sir Ralph Woodland. But naturally in the morning they returned to the subject.

George went out early to order a carriage, and Laura and Anna Lindsay consulted about the luncheon. Anna was quite excited at the idea of the coming excursion, but Laura was un-

usually grave and pale. She was in the drawing - room alone when Sir Ralph arrived a few minutes before he was expected, and just as Anna Lindsay entered the room she overheard him say, in his somewhat deep voice,—

‘You were quite right about Miss Patty May. I have received such a letter from her, and have returned that also.’

And there was something in his tone that attracted Anna’s sharp ears. It implied an intimacy that their manner to each other before people did not indicate. He moved, too, rather quickly from her side as Anna entered, but then that was merely to go forward to shake hands with Anna.

But still a first suspicion that they

were acting a part entered this woman's brain. She secretly watched them at luncheon, and she watched them as Sir Ralph and George sat opposite to them afterwards in the carriage, and more than once she caught Sir Ralph's dark eyes fixed on Laura's face.

Then, when they reached Harewood, after going over the house, which looked dull and dreary, as all uninhabited houses do, the little party proceeded to the grounds, where the October sunshine was falling on the tall elms and grass - grown walks. Naturally now they could not all walk abreast, and naturally also, Anna fell to George's care, while Sir Ralph went on by Laura's side.

'George,' said Anna suddenly, 'let us go and look at the fish-pond.'

Uncle was telling us last night about feeding the carp in it in the old squire's time.'

'But the others have gone past it,' said George,

'Oh, we will soon pick them up; and it will please uncle if we tell him we remembered about the carp.'

'Very well,' said George good-naturedly.

So the cousins went down to the fish-pond, while Sir Ralph and Laura proceeded onwards towards the great belt of tall elms at the end of the grounds, amid which a colony of rooks were cawing and flitting from tree to tree.

'Well, what do you think of the place?' asked Sir Ralph, somewhat abruptly.

‘It is a fine old place, but it looks rather desolate, does it not?’ answered Laura.

‘I like it somehow; I think it will suit me.’

‘But, Sir Ralph,’ began Laura, nervously, ‘is—is it wise to come?’

‘Why?’ he replied coldly.

This curt answer was so perfectly unexpected to Laura that her face flushed and then grew pale, and the two walked on in silence for the next few minutes.

‘There is plenty of game, I am told, and it is a good hunting country,’ presently said Sir Ralph, ‘and the old house will look better when it is inhabited. You and Mr Gifford must come and pay me a visit when I am settled.’

‘Thank you,’ answered Laura, mechanically. She had meant to ask him not to take this place; not to throw himself in her way, but Sir Ralph so ignored her in the matter that she felt it was impossible to speak on the subject.

‘By-the-bye,’ presently said Sir Ralph, ‘I was just going to tell you all about Patty May’s letter when Miss Lindsay came in before luncheon. The girl is off her head! She entreated me; she implored me with tears in her eyes, she wrote, to tell her how she had offended me. She said she must see me, and all sorts of insane folly.’

‘And did you write any answer?’

‘Not a line; I simply put the letter into another envelope, and sent

it back to her, and that was the rudest thing I could do, wasn't it? And she deserves everything she has got, and more.'

'It was very treacherous.'

'It was worse—' and then Sir Ralph muttered something between his teeth that sounded very like an oath, and turned away, and for the next few minutes preserved a gloomy silence, which Laura did not attempt to break.

His very walk showed the restless impatience of his mind. He was thinking, 'She has spoilt two lives, this girl I was fool enough to believe'; and his heart was very bitter towards Miss Patty May.

Presently, however, he roused himself from his moody reverie. He be-

gan talking of Danvers Park and Mrs Vanhurst.

‘There is a woman,’ he said, ‘with an excellent husband of her own, yet who wishes, and tries to make every man she sees in love with her! It is, however, only a happy delusion of her own that any man is.’

‘You are very severe on the poor little woman,’ answered Laura, smiling.

‘Just severity. Ah, there is Mr Gifford and Miss Lindsay; I wonder where they have been?’

When they met, George and Anna Lindsay explained. They had been to the fish-pond, and declared it was well worth seeing.

‘It’s a charming place altogether, Sir Ralph,’ said Anna.

‘It’s a nice old-world place, I think,’ he answered. ‘When I am settled I hope you will all come and pay me a visit, Mr Gifford.’

‘That would be delightful!’ cried Anna Lindsay, instantly adopting the invitation.

‘There’s capital shooting about, so it would be a great treat to come,’ said George, highly pleased at the prospect.

‘Well, then, I shall hope to see you ere long. What about the necessary repairs, Mr Gifford?’

The two men then began to talk on business matters, and Laura and Anna Lindsay walked on together among the old-fashioned flower-beds, now choked with weeds. The leaves came floating down from the tall

trees to their feet ; in the air was the indescribable taint and tint of the fading year. A strange feeling of melancholy crept over Laura's heart, and she scarcely listened to, or answered, Anna Lindsay's lively remarks.

‘He's evidently quite taken a fancy to the place,’ said Anna. ‘I wonder what his own place in Yorkshire is like?’ And so on.

Sir Ralph had, however, apparently ‘quite taken a fancy to the place,’ for when the gentlemen rejoined them they found that the arrangements for the purchase of Harewood were practically complete.

‘And I wish you joy of your purchase, Sir Ralph,’ said George cordially.

‘Thanks,’ replied Sir Ralph, without cordiality.

After this they started on their return to Suffolk, and when they reached that town Sir Ralph took leave of Laura and Miss Lindsay. He was going to return that evening to Danvers Park, but before doing so went with George to his office to sign some necessary papers.

‘I’ve done a good day’s work,’ said George, with elation, when he returned home after parting with Sir Ralph.

‘You have,’ thought Anna Lindsay, with malignant pleasure.

And just about ten days after this she felt sure that her suspicions regarding Sir Ralph Woodland and her cousin’s wife were true. In the meantime George and Sir Ralph had

written to each other twice about the repairs at Harewood, and in each case George had shown Sir Ralph's letters to Laura and Anna Lindsay. They were, however, purely business ones, and he made no mention in them of any immediate intention of visiting Harewood. But one day, when Anna Lindsay came in from her afternoon walk, and was proceeding to the drawing-room for five-o'clock tea, just as she reached the room door she heard a man's voice speaking within, whose tone reminded her of Sir Ralph Woodland's.

She stopped and listened, and did not go into the room, but went to the top of the kitchen stairs and called the waiting-maid to her.

'Who is that in the drawing-room?' she asked.

‘Sir Ralph Woodland, Miss Lindsay,’ answered the waiting-maid.

‘Is my uncle there?’ she inquired.

‘No, miss, the old gentleman is out.’

Anna Lindsay asked nothing more. She quietly returned to the drawing-room door, and from where she stood could distinctly hear what was said within the room. It was Sir Ralph Woodland who was speaking.

‘I cannot help it,’ he was saying; ‘I cannot keep away.’

‘But is it wise, is it right?’ answered Laura, with a tremulous ring in her voice.

‘It may not be, but, Laura, when I believed evil of you, when that lying girl had maligned you so shamefully, I tried to forget you, and I could not.

I came back to seek you then, and I have come back now.'

'I wish you had not bought that place, Sir Ralph; I tried to tell you this the day we went to Harewood.'

'I know you did, and I would not listen. I bought it to be near you, but I have no need to tell you this.'

'But—but it is no use—I can only see you very rarely.'

'But for the sake of these rare visits I mean to live there. Do not reproach me, for I cannot help myself.'

Anna Lindsay listened no longer. She heard one of the servants coming up the kitchen stairs, and with swift, sure footsteps she hurried away. But she had heard enough. She knew now that the two in the drawing-room had met before they met at Lady Danvers',

as George Gifford supposed; she knew that they had been lovers, she believed they were lovers now.

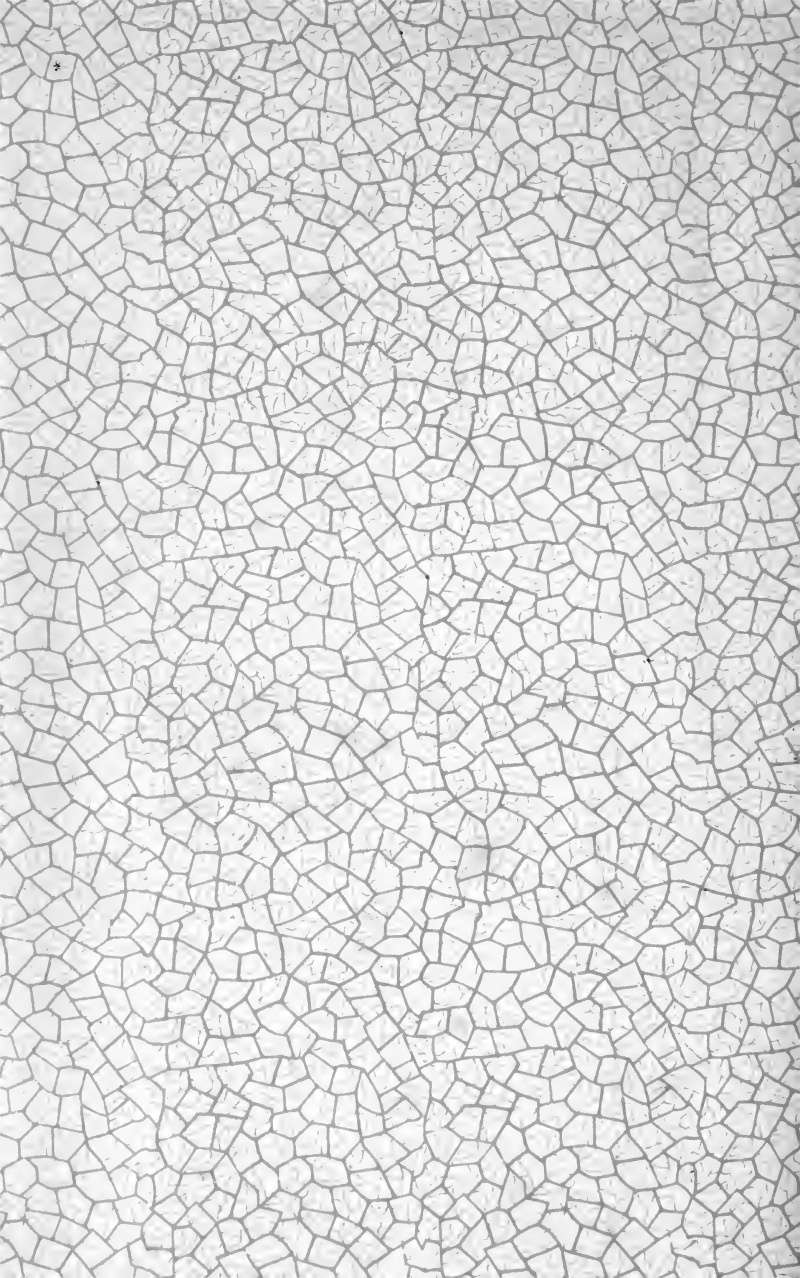
Her red brown eyes sparkled, and she sank down on a chair in her own room, trembling and gasping with excitement.

‘He has taken that place to be near her,’ she told herself; ‘he will persuade her to run away with him, and George—George will come back to me.’

END OF VOL. II.







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